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Joseph Vercelli

Interviewed by  
Bob Mosher  
with Eric Davis





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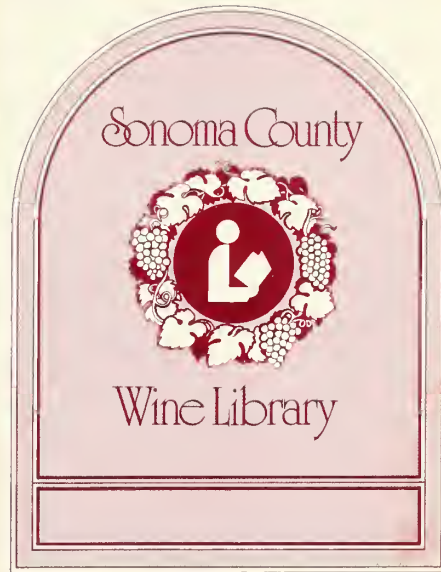
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August 1990

Transcription 1993



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## Introduction

Joseph Vercelli was born in San Francisco of immigrants from Italy's Piedmont region. Joe's father, Pasqual, came over first and worked in San Francisco. There he earned enough to send for Joe's mother, Maria, she arrived *hours* before the devastating 1906 earthquake and fire in the City.

Joe's mother came from a winemaking family and carried on this tradition after being widowed, although law forced her to *borrow* a head-of-household, because this was a position women could not hold. Joe and his brother, Louis, were raised in San Francisco during the difficult periods of the Depression and Prohibition with Joe entering the wine industry at Repeal. He started his career at Italian Swiss Colony at Asti in late 1933, while there he worked with many of the small winemakers in Sonoma County, in some cases clarifying their wine at the heavy price of 10 cents per gallon — heavy when you consider the finished wine sold for 15 cents a gallon.

During his career he worked for Scatena Brothers Wine Company on Grove Street in Healdsburg before starting his own wine company with his brother, Louis. They had three labels, Vercelli Brothers, Verbro, and Alpine. He relates some of the traumatic experiences as well as the triumphs from his love of the industry. His early export endeavors to the Pacific Rim echo today's trade difficulties.

Joe was an active member in the early days of the Wine Institute and with its leadership's aid survived the 7 cents a gallon days to see wine priced at \$50 a bottle and more—and wonder at it! He talks about the cyclic nature of the industry—the effect of wars, Prohibition, Depression, Prorate and the eternal problem of creating a good product and marketing it. During his long activity with wine, he spent five years as a wine judge for the California State Fair in Sacramento. During the 1970's Joe was able to visit his parents' birthplace in Italy and attended a cooking school. After he took a consulting-retirement from Souverain Winery in Geyserville in 1981, he joined with his daughter, Chef Anne Vercelli, sharing his knowledge of wines through her Italian Cooking course at Santa Rosa Junior College. His active retirement also permitted him to spend a great deal of time researching and undertaking a number of oral history interviews with many of "the Old-Timers" of Sonoma County's wine industry, gaining him deserved recognition as a wine historian.

Today Joe still lives in Healdsburg with his wife Livia and daughter Anne.

Gail Ryan, March 1994





**Joseph Vercelli**

Interviewed by Bob Mosher with Eric Davis  
June 24, July 1, and September 9, 1990  
The Vercelli Home 251 Solar Way, Healdsburg, CA

Transcription by Gail Ryan, Healdsburg August 1993

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**First Tape      Sunday, June 24, 1990**

Eric Davis:      I'm going to ask Joe, first of all, to give us an overview, if you would, of this industry.

Joseph Vercelli:      What period of time would you like me to commence with?

Bob Mosher:      Why don't you talk about the whole range of things and then we'll zero in on some early years.

Vercelli:      I'd like to tell you first how I got into the industry.

Mosher:      Good, that's a great place to begin.

Vercelli:      I think that that would be appropriate.

As far back as I can recall, my mother, who was widowed, made wine in the City of San Francisco. At the time, the law was that only the head of a household could apply for a permit to make wine during Prohibition. This individual could have on hand solely 200 gallons of wine, irrespective of the vintages in which the wine was made. My mother being a widow, was not recognized as the 'Head of a Household' then. It was only in recent years, in fact in the last ten years, that they modified that law or repealed that law so that today a woman or anyone [not only head of household] can apply for a license. So my mother, although a citizen, was not entitled to apply for a permit to make wine. Consequently, it was our neighbor, George Folsom who lived across the street, who would go to the Post Office and apply for the license, then my mother would go to the market and buy the grapes. The deal was that my mother would get half of the wine and George Folsom, who put up the money, would get the balance of the wine.

We would make the wine on our premises. On the first moonless, rainy night, we'd roll the barrels of completed wine over to George Folsom's cellar, where of course, he had the permit on the wall. That would usually take place in



December. The nights were long and the days were short and we rolled our barrels of wine across the street.

That would be in the early part of the '20's, I guess I was 10—11—12 years old. I can remember in making the wine, my mother, brother and I would, during the first few years, stomp the grapes with our feet and we'd do that in a galvanized tub in which we would take our Saturday bath. I would wear a pair of Keds, those canvas covered rubber shoes and my brother would do the same, when the grapes were stomped. Since I was much shorter than my brother, my mother would get one handle and my brother the other handle of the tub and I would kind of tilt the tub over into the puncheon. A puncheon was about a 175 gallon container. So from there on, my mother would look after the wine, taste the wine.

We didn't use very much equipment. My mother determined the sugar content by taste. When she went to buy the grapes, she would feel the grape and if the grape gave, it was acceptable. She would usually purchase Zinfandel. Occasionally, the Zinfandel grape would have raisined berries, she had come from a winemaking family, but they had never had raisins involved in the winemaking from where she came, so she was always afraid of an over-mature grape. And if you look back at what has transpired since that time, we in the industry don't like to have over-ripe fruit. So in any event, that was the beginning of my experiences.

I recall one year, mother was talked into making wine out of apples. Someone had them delivered, we had a building that she rented out as a warehouse and they brought in several hundred boxes of apples. They weren't able to sell the apples as fresh fruit, so we started to make wine out of apples—hard cider. I remember we had to get a grinder to grind up the apples. We made maybe, oh, 2-300 gallons of it. Of course, we didn't have the capacity to make much. This was a clandestine activity because we didn't get a permit. That was around 1922-23, I was about 11 or 12 years old.

Mosher: So the Volsted Act came into existence in 1919 and went to, what—1932 or 1933?

Vercelli: It was passed by Congress in 1919, became effective in 1920, I believe it was January 1, 1920, then it was repealed on December 6, 1933, and I entered the industry on August 22, 1933.





I got to work with the Italian Swiss through my brother, he was in the brokerage business at the time and was sort of a runner for a brokerage house. There he met A. P. Giannini. Mr. Giannini knew Mr. Sbarbaro, this Sbarbaro was Vice President of the Bank of America on Montgomery Street. My brother, Louis, was with the bank and he knew the sons of Andrea (Sbarbaro) who had founded Italian Swiss Colony, Romulo and Remo. Additionally, my mother had taken care of a girl, whose aunt, Bianca Orsini,, was married to Dr. Bioletti, Frederick Bioletti's son, Carlton. So when I was going to enter the industry, I mentioned to Mrs. Della Costa, who was Mrs. Orsini's eldest sister, that I was going to work for a winery, she said. "Well, if that's the case, why don't you get in touch with Bianca and she can introduce you to her father-in-law." So I met Dr. Bioletti in May of 1933 and from the time I met him, I was tutored by him every weekend and whatever free time I could spare, because I was working and going to school at the time. I would take the street car, the ferry boat, the electric train to go to Berkeley to his home and then he would give me an assignment, he'd give me reading matter and the like. This was very important in that he introduced me to a purveyor of malts and winery equipment, small winery equipment, a firm by the name of Justiani Caire. Justiani Caire was at the foot of Market Street in San Francisco.

Caire was related to Pietro Rossi of Italian Swiss Colony either through marriage or blood ties. So, I would go down to Justiani and he taught me to run an ebuliscoper, a device to measure the alcohol content of wine that we still use today.

Mosher: What year was that?

Vercelli: That was in May 1933, when I realized I couldn't continue my schooling. I left Cal as a senior and went to work for the Italian Swiss Colony. By the way, I had 17 letters of recommendation to get a job that paid 20 cents an hour. I had a number of priests in the Dioceses of San Francisco giving me letters of recommendation. My mother was a very devoted Catholic. Everyone knew Maria and Maria knew all the priests.

Mosher: You sold grape concentrate, didn't you?

Vercelli: Yes. In the Spring and the Fall of 1932, I worked for a salesman that sold grape concentrate and grape juice for the Italian Swiss Colony. He was a customer of my brother's in the brokerage business. His name was Leo Fassi. Leo Fassi would do the selling and then I would go down the San



Francisco Peninsula and deliver. We had such accounts as Foster, Foster & Kleiser, the sign people, we had the Tobin Family of Hibernia Bank and other people whose names I don't recall. These were very prominent people. So when Leo would send me down with so many cans of concentrate, I would dilute the concentrate and convert it into juice just as we do juices today. Then I would inoculate it....they would supply you with a little vial of yeast. It was an agar slant, about an inch long. This vial of yeast came with a little piece of paper that said if that yeast would find its way into the contents of the juice without a permit, you were subject to a fine or imprisonment. And then by the same token, that same advice was attached to a five gallon container of grape juice. The instructions were that if you removed the cap and put it in a warm place and if this yeast found its way into the contents of the container you would be producing wine which required a permit.

Mosher: You would have that illegal substance known as "wine".

Vercelli: [Illegal] Unless you had a permit. In addition to grape concentrate and grape juice there was another product call the "wine brick". These were rectangular objects primarily consisting of pressed grape stems, their appearance was very much that of a building brick, about two and a half inches high and maybe three inches wide and about eight inches long. They were wrapped in a heavy waxed craft paper, sticky stuff. The bricks were dunked or submerged in grape concentrate. The directions were given to put the brick in a given volumn of lukewarm water. Leon Adams can confirm this, because at the time he interviewed me, we talked about this.

Mosher: What was the point of the brick? It was stems and—

Vercelli: It was stems that were compressed and saturated with grape concentrate.

Mosher: —To make it taste more like real wine, huh?

Vercelli: Well, I assume so. And then that was dumped into a concentrate with about a balling of 60 plus. It was real sticky stuff, would hardly run, just like molasses—real thick.

Mosher: So, you were creating a must.

Vercelli: Yes, basically, we were creating a must with the stems. The concentrate came packed in cans, though usually cans that were about, oh, 28 ounces, then you had a large can, a gallon





size can. You could buy the concentrate in any malt store during the Prohibition era. So it was something that was not uncommon.

Mosher: I'll be darned.

Davis: Back tracking a bit, who was Bioletti?

Vercelli: He's one of the world's foremost viticulturists prior to Prohibition. He was the man that did the work on the phylloxera in the 1890's.

Professor Bioletti worked with the Gundlach-Bundschu Winery, the Rhineland Vineyards and Jacob Dresler, both in the Sonoma Valley. He did the work in 1896-97. He was the one that did research on the use of the American stock. He and Hilgard, after whom they named a building on the U. C. Berkeley campus. This was the [University of California] Agricultural Department before Davis.

Before you leave and before I forget, I want to go back to winemaking, my mother's winemaking. She drew the wine off, the first ranking of the wine. Then she would get a 100 pound sack of brown, unrefined sugar and throw it onto the must. Then she would replace the amount of wine that she withdrew with lukewarm water and she then punched that down and made what was called "Pichetta", little wine. This was drank right away. She wouldn't drink the new wine until the spring of the following year, but the "Pichetta" was drunk soon thereafter. If you didn't drink it right away, it would spoil because it didn't have much of an alcoholic content, having only 4 or 5% alcohol.

This is indicative of the times, of the evolution of winemaking today. Today it is so sophisticated—we have to have this, that, and the other. The other important thing is with the problems that we're having today, that we didn't have during Prohibition, our trouble in this country is that we don't start teaching people about wine until they are 21. But by then they've already formed their habits. The Catholic Church is smart, they take them from the womb and on through to the tomb.

Mosher: That's smart.

Vercelli: The other point, I wanted to make, was on production procedures on Repeal of Prohibition. We started with cast iron equipment. Take filtration, we used asbestos in the



finishing of wine to membrane filters today. The evolution of the industry is amazing in 50 years.

In 1937, we marketed a wine with a vapor vacuum seal, similar to the seal used on tomato products. About 15 years ago, Paul Masson came out and said they were the innovators of the method of sealing a wine container with a vapor vacuum seal. I get a bit peeved because I did that work 20 years before they ever came out [with it]. I did the work with the White Cap Company of Chicago, my contact was a Mr. Forsythe. I would like to say a word about canned wine. in the late 1930's there was an instructor in the Department of Fruit Products at the University of California, Berkeley by the name of Larry Saywell. He had patented the use of Bentonite as a clarifier for wine. For some unexplainable reason he was never able to collect a royalty on the patent, I believe August Sebastiani challenged the validity of the patent. Saywell left the employ of the University to work for the Pacific Coast Can Company, which company had contemplated to can wine. Saywell contacted me while I was in the employ of Scatina Brothers Wine Company, (as their plant manager and winemaker). At that time Acampo Winery of Acampo owned by Ceasar Mondavi, Archie Celleni and a representative of a small bank in Lodi were experimenting with canning wine. I think it was the American Can Company supplying the cans. I visited the Acampo Winery to learn of their canning operation. I was greeted with a pile of experimental cans as high as their building, which was about 20 feet high.

Mosher: What year was this?

Vercelli: 1937—38.

Mosher: I sold some canned Beaujolais back in 1972, little cans of French Beaujolais came over to the States and it didn't go over well. I remember buying it and trying to sell it at a shop down in Sausalito.

Vercelli: The Greenwood Winery at Philo has a great collection of canned wine. In their collection I saw Italian Swiss Miss which I have a can of in my wine cellar.

Here again is another reason I'd like to get into [discussing] the production experience. There was a winery, the Muscat Cooperative Winery, let's disgress first. Roma Wine Company canned wine. Italian Swiss Colony canned wine. But for Muscat Cooperative, that was their last venture, they gambled everything on the canning of wine. It was such a





failure they went into bankruptcy. They were right across the street in Madera from the Madera plant of Arakalian, which was Mission Bell. So when I get into production of wine, more will be said of this.

Mosher: Before you get into production, you were talking about how your mother came from a wine producing area. Can we explore a little of that?

Vercelli: Oh, yes, I'd be happy to tell you about that. I visited Italy in 1974 and again in 1978, in 1978 I was enrolled in Marcella Hasan's cooking class in Bologna, that was a gift for my years of service given to me upon my retirement from Italian Swiss. So at that time, after I'd gone to school, we rented a car and we visited all of Northern Italy and visited my mother's birthplace. We visited the winery that her family had, it was a far cry from the way she described it. But this is what I remember her telling me. She lived right at the foot of the Alps, there was snow on the Alps throughout the year. She went swimming and bathing in the river Po, there was water there all year round. They were self-sufficient. They grew flax, wheat, and corn was their mainstay. They would take it to the miller and they would get a portion of it back and feed chickens and other fowl and then they would graze veal and lamb. They had to go to the town Mayor to get permission to kill an animal that they were going to eat. This is one reason why she migrated to America.

Both my parents lived in an area where King Emanuel II had a hunting preserve. When the King went hunting, he was accompanied by a caravan of soldiers. The common folk weren't permitted to look at the king from the roadside. They had to stand behind the bushes as the King's entourage went. They were required to 'shine the cobblestones'. They didn't particularly like that suppression, if you can call it such. So my father came to America.

But my mother's stories from the winemaking standpoint, she'd say they'd make the wine and after the wine was made, they would put it in puncheons, large barrels that they could roll, and then on the fall of the first snow, they'd bury this wine in the snow. When spring came and the snow thawed, they'd transfer the wine and it was sold. We do the same thing with all of our mechanical refrigeration. We refrigerate to precipitate the components effected by cold.

Mosher: Cold stabilized it.

Vercelli: Cold stabilized wine, so we're not that smart!



- Davis: What was the home town you visited?
- Vercelli: Valfenera, under the Province of Asti,. It was a small town, I saw the school that she went to, the church that they were married in. It was a small town about maybe 20-25 miles southeast of Turin.
- Something else about my mother's winemaking techniques, she never had, to the best of my knowledge, a gallon of wine that turned sour. Everyone else in the neighborhood that would make wine envied Maria because her wine was always sound and stayed sound. But my mother was very, very impressed with sanitation practices. She always used the sulphur wick. She dried and washed her barrels with salsoda. I knew the word *salsoda* because she's send me to purchase it, I could hardly pronounce it. It was put out by Arm & Hammer in a container that was about three inches thick and about eight inches wide, 12 inches long. It was more or less colorless or white crystals. She'd take a cup of that and throw it in the barrel and wash it up.
- Mosher: Very sound winemaking practices.
- Vercelli: This is the point, then she'd take a chain and she'd tie it on a bung and put the chain in the barrel so that as she rolled the barrel and washed it with the soda, it would knock off any cream of tartar. I know that today, but what did I know then! Then we would lay the barrel and the half barrels on a ladder turned upside down so there was sort of a rail there, we could roll the barrel easily and then we'd drain it. She would never use the barrel until it was dry, real dry and she would never put the barrel away, she never bunged it up if there was moisture.
- Mosher: Where did your mother learn how to make wine so well, these are very sound practices.
- Mr. Vercelli: They had done it for centuries.
- Mosher: You mean where she grew up, the best wine was made this way.
- Vercelli: Everybody made wine that way. Wine was the sole source of revenue for my mother's family. The Arduino family, had only two children, which was unusual to only have two children. This was the sole source of revenue. Salt was taxed and it was distributed by the government. Even thought it is



considered a necessity of life, so to speak, strange too, it was sold with tobacco, which was taxed by the government.

Mosher: So, she was fed up with all this stuff and came to the States.

Vercelli: She used to make a tea of peach leaves. She would go out and harvest the leaves of the peach tree and then she'd make a tea, maybe a gallon or two. So after she had washed the barrels with salsoda and rinsed with water, then she would use this tea, concentrated tea, and throw it into the barrels. It neutralized any alkalinity that remained from the soda ash that wasn't rinsed out.

Mosher: Your mother's being involved in the winemaking, was that typical for women in that particular area of Italy or because she was part of a small family?

Vercelli: I would think that it was typical of that area. Everyone worked. She did all types of work. She worked behind the oxen. It was a matter of necessity, a matter of survival. They did everything, but had little formal education. She only went to five years of grade school and father didn't go to school at all. He learned to read and write once he was conscripted into the Army when the Italians invaded Ethiopia sometime in the 1890's. That's where he learned to read and write. He did so well that he made more money reading and writing for illiterate soldiers than what the government paid him in the form of wages as a soldier. So life was a matter of survival, they were very poor.

Mosher: Both your mother and father worked at these pursuits.

Vercelli: As for my father, I don't know about them making wine. I lost my father when I was four and a half. I have a vague recollection of him. He had a sister, which would be my aunt. She left Italy when she was a girl, she came over here. In fact, my uncle by marriage came over in the late 1890's and he landed up in Vancouver. There are coal mines up there. Uncle John was a great big strapping guy. From Canada, he migrated to California. He and my aunt had married in Italy, but she stayed there until he moved to California. My father came over in 1904 and my mother came over in 1906. My father came over on borrowed passage. He worked to repay his passage and had enough to pay for my mother's passage in 1906. But that's another story, I'll tell you later.

Mosher: Would you go over again about how your mother would take the half barrels and flip them up high for that siphoning thing?





- Vercelli: Sure. My mother would take a half barrel which weighs plus or minus 300 pounds—if you take the weight of wine at about 8.2 pounds per gallon and the weight of the container between 30-35 pounds. And so she would roll the barrel onto her knee from a prone position, boost the barrel and put it on her breast and then put it up to her eye level on a rack. She did that so she could siphon the wine from that container to another container when she racked her wine. That way it didn't disturb the lees. She would also put a stick at the end of a hose, so she'd never let the hose get to the bottom of the barrel. The hose was tied about an inch up from the end of a stick, depending upon the age of the wine.
- Mosher: So she'd just get the clean wine and none of the sediment.
- Vercelli: She'd get the clean wine. She would vary where she attached the stick depending upon the age of the wine. If it was new wine, then she would maybe do an inch and a half or two inches...
- Mosher: Because there's more lees —
- Vercelli: So if it was an older wine, then she'd go down maybe an half inch from the bottom. And the first little bit she'd pour out into another container.
- Mosher: Just in case.
- Vercelli: Yes. She'd pour it in and maybe she'd have a pot or something there and then she'd take a look at it and when she thought it was clear, she'd put it in the other container.
- Davis: Joe, I think you said something I'm not sure we had this on the tape, about inclement weather.
- Vercelli: She'd never rack wine or transfer wine from one container to the other during inclement weather. I would assume the barometric pressure had something to do with it. She'd never rack wine but only under a given moon. I don't remember what the moon was. She did everything by the moon: planting the vegetables and racking the wine.
- I forgot to tell you something about buying grapes. She bought the grapes when they were ripe and the price was right. She primarily liked Zinfandel, but she always got a box or two or three of a table grape, either a white grape, white or Tokay. I think that was for quantity. I think the Tokay was a big grape, seed and a lot of juice. The white grape—the same



thing. Most of the white grapes that they had at the time was Golden Chasselas. We didn't have the varieties that we have today, the Golden Chasselas was a grape that gave you a large yield with a lot of substance.

Mosher: How was your mother regarded by her neighbors? Was she considered particularly industrious and intelligent? It sounds to me like she probably stood out.

Vercelli: Well, she had enough acumen to prosper, after my father died, she went to work in a malt store and then from there she went to work wrapping glass containers, one gallon, two gallon and five gallon containers with this reed and rattan. And when she mastered that, she went into business for herself at home, as she had two kids and we didn't have baby sitters in those days. My mother was very proud, when my father died and this is important to me, when my father died we were the only Italians on that specific block. I would say one of about three families in the whole block—the 400 block on Vienna Street in San Francisco. At that time, there were as many vacant lots as there were houses on that block. It was lined on one side by Persia Avenue, the other side by Brazil Avenue and then the rear was Athens Street and we lived on Vienna. Of all that square block there could have been maybe four or five Italian families. We had Puerto Ricans, we had Germans, we had Irish, we had English, we had Scotch, we had Polish, it was a cosmopolitan area.

And so getting back to the question that you asked—in about 1924, early 1925, my mother went into business and she opened up a dry goods store, a little notions. She started first with things she would do, she would make sweaters and sell them, she'd knit socks and sell them. She did very good needle work. So she opened up the store and she kept the store until about 1934-1935. I was away from home when she closed up the store.

My father died in 1917. In 1919, we had an epidemic of the flu, influenza and it killed a lot of people and at the same time, the war was coming to an end. In 1918-19, you had the First World War on and you had a migration of a lot of people from the agricultural areas into the city to work for the war effort. They would be either conscripted for the Army or they had to get into National Defense. So, my mother being a widow [to support us], she used to wash clothing for 20 men. At that time you didn't have many hotels, anyone that had an extra room or anyone that could get along with other people had a boarder, it was very common. My mother could collect the clothing from the men that lived in houses in the area. I





remember that we didn't have washing machines then, we had the wood stove and the washboard. She had the wood stove and would get the wood, everybody had trees, you'd cut down a tree and she would heat the water on the wood stove. She had two of these open tubs, then she had a copper boiler, sort of a rectangular affair made of copper that had two rounded ends and it had a lid on top of it so the water would heat rather rapidly. She'd realized that copper was a good conductor of heat and so she'd take the two lids off the stove so you got a direct flame and then she'd stoke the fire. While she did this, she'd always bake to not waste the heat, she'd bake bread or something or other.

Mosher: To take advantage of the heat, real savvy.

Vercelli: Mrs. Edwards, right across the street, she'd come from the Midwest and she too came from an agricultural area so during the First World War, my mother put up practically every kind of vegetable. We brought butter in large 5 pound containers, unsalted butter, and then she'd pack it in salt in a crock, as we had no refrigeration. When we wanted the butter, she'd just throw the rock salt aside and take butter for two or three days, whenever she wanted. She learned to make pickles. She learned to make sauerkraut and we were self-sufficient during that period of time, then we had chickens, rabbits, and pigeons. We'd get our eggs as soon as they were more or less warm, we'd hear the chicken brag about the fact that it had dropped an egg. It'd cackle, so we'd run down and get the egg and she'd take the eggs and clean them off and then she'd put it in a water glass with silicate of soda. Through Mr. and Mrs. Edwards she'd learned that. She also would preserve the eggs by putting them in bran. I don't ever remember eating a rotten egg—I know what a rotten egg is and I have smelled them.

We had a three room house, so we didn't have clothes in the bureau in our rooms. The front room was the bedroom, the second was the living room and in the living room we had a folding bed. My brother and I slept together in the folding bed. And the rear room was the kitchen, off the kitchen we had a little recess where we had water. We did not have an indoor toilet. The toilet was outside, although it was flushing. We had our own well. We also had city water, but I remember using the well to get water.

Let's go back to my father for a second. When I visited Italy in 1978, we went to the church and I saw the records of my parent's marriage, then I walked around the town—I speak a little Italian, so I saw an old timer sitting there and I went up



to him and I asked him if he remembered my father. My father's name in this country was Anthony—Antonio, but in Italy it was Pasqual. So I went to this fellow asked him if he remembered Pasqual Vercelli. He says, "Do I remember him? Sure, that's the first time I got drunk, when he left for America." He says, "I was 14 years old." So, he was at my father's going away party. I'm sorry I never got his name. He says, "I sure remember your father." This fella must have been in his 90's, he was real shriveled.

But getting back to my father, he borrowed money to come over to America. In 1906, he brought over my mother and he was able to furnish a house. My mother arrived here on April 17th, Tuesday night, April 17, 1906. She was greeted and she arrived at her home in San Francisco at 10:00 o'clock at night. At five o'clock in the morning was the earthquake and fire. That was her introduction to the new world. This affected her the rest of her life, whenever she saw a fire she would recall her plight upon arrival in San Francisco. Unfortunately, we lived on a street with a fire house at the end of the street and every time she heard the firemen go out with the horses, the bells ring, she would kind of go into a little emotional stress. She moved here to Healdsburg during the war years. I had a tartrate recovery operation here on Healdsburg Avenue, I'll show you the pictures of that. During her stay, the pomace started a fire from internal combustion, my mother had to be restrained.

Getting back to my father, he had loaned \$500 of American money to someone who was lost in the fire and he never recovered the money. Two years later, in 1908, my brother was born and my father put in \$500 American dollars in the Postal Savings of Rome. When he became 21 years old, which would have been in 1929 or so, I got my money four years later in 1933. Due to the Italian economy, my brother didn't get very much money, just some odd hundred dollars. Had my father put it in the Bank of America, Giannini's bank, even at 1% interest he would have made money, but that was in 1908. When I was born in December of 1912, he also put \$500 in the Postal Savings of Rome and I got my money—\$400 [something] a little under \$500. When in 1928 Mussolini took over in Italy, the value of the lira went up, although when my brother got his money it was lower, so fortunately, I got practically all my money back.

In 1913, my father bought a piece of property which we still own. In fact, a second piece is currently being sold.



My father worked for Eaton & Smith, they were paving contractors, he also made shoes, he constructed shoes, a complete shoe. He was a shoemaker. He had learned that in the old country and brought it here. When he died we had all his last (foot forms of a shoemaker) and all his equipment. So he worked for Eaton & Smith every morning till dark, he worked 10-12 hours in those days. When he had time he made shoes. My father and mother built a new building sometime prior to 1917, in a portion of that building they had a little room where he worked to make his shoes and to sell them. He had a little display room.

He also sold brandy in our three room house. In the portion of the house where we had the sink, we had a rack there with the two barrels of brandy there. I still remember the brass spigots. In fact, I had the brass spigots until we started to move away from San Francisco.

Well, this gives you an idea of the kind of man he was.

So when he died, he was burned, and this is ironical, with a piece of macadama—you could cover the wound with a quarter, it was a very small wound. He was treated by Dr. Coffey, who has received a great deal of recognition for his work with the cancer, ever since the early development of cancer research he had publicized his work. It was Dr. Coffey that treated my father.

Mosher: Was it typical for Italians to come to California, to San Francisco, to Asti?

Vercelli: I think that it's true of Italians of that era, having looked into the history. A lot of Italians migrated to the Italian Swiss Colony, but the Italians would land in San Francisco and they would all say "Vado alla Colonia", "I'm going to the Colony." If you look at the make-up of Sonoma County, down the telephone directory, and trace back a generation or two, you'd find that the bulk of them had a beginning at Asti. You'd be surprised at how many people migrated from Asti, started from Asti and then moved on to the other parts of Sonoma County.

Mosher: That's interesting. Now, where did the "Swiss" side become part of the name?

Vercelli: I can't answer how the "Swiss" came in because they were all Italians. I know of none of the original directors of the Italian Swiss that were basically Swiss. I don't know how they derived the word "Swiss" in there. I am not aware of any. All





the early founders of Italian Swiss—Fontana, Oleno, all Italians—no reference was ever made of them being Swiss.

Mosher: That's interesting. And so Sbarbaro was the founder? And when did the Rossis take it over?

Vercelli: Sbarbaro started as a grocer in Oakland. And he established a Savings and Loan in the late 1880's. He started the Italian Swiss Colony as an agricultural colony, sort of a cooperative effort. Of course at the time, you had Fountain Grove that had started as a colony. You had Icaria, the French colony up just four or five miles north of Asti. I have a copy of a pamphlet telling the story of Icaria.

Mosher: Icaria was right in Cloverdale?

Vercelli: No, it was just south of Cloverdale. They just dedicated a plaque there just recently.

Mosher: By MGM's plant?

Vercelli: Yes, just a little bit south of there. I guess it was two miles north of Asti. Asti's property terminated, a couple of small ranches in between and then it was the Icarians. They were there for 5 years. So the concept at the time was cooperative in movement and they were people who were persecuted. The Icarians were persecuted, they had come from France. They landed in, I think, Louisiana, then from there they went into Iowa.

Mosher: Were they a religious sect?

Vercelli: Whether they were primarily more religious than political I don't know. I do know that as far as the Italian Swiss was concerned there was definitely a commune movement on.

Auguston Haraszthy was not a member or founder of a commune cult. He sought to settle in Sonoma County only after his failed attempt at growing grapes in San Mateo County. He couldn't control the growing period on the Peninsula to grow grapes.

Mosher: And he got his property from General Mariano Vallejo and his boy married Vallejo's daughter.

Vercelli: Yes, and of course he did his work in 1860-61. I have his book. It was published by Harper Brothers in 1862. Did I show you his book?



Mosher: We sell a book at Buena Vista Winery, I don't know if it's his book, or one that's written about him.

Well now, the Italian Swiss Colony and the Icarians—

Vercelli: Yes, the Icarians. It was called Icaria, there was a railroad station so called.

Consequently, there was that movement afoot at that time. When Andreas Sbarbaro started in 1881, he had an idea of it being more or less a cooperative movement. Many of the Italians that were arriving would end up there. But most of them, being that they had come from a society that had already been persecuted, I cited my mother's example, they wanted to say they had come to the *Land of Milk and Honey*, they wanted to see a monetary return.

Mosher: So, it sounds like there was a pervasive philosophy at Italian Swiss Colony that maybe that's why they moved so far away from San Francisco, so no one could mess with them. So nobody would overlay judgments or rulings or dictate to them. They wanted to be free.

Vercelli: If that were the case, it was through Sbarbaro's leadership. Though they looked at land at other places, this area was reminiscent of the homeland. They came from Northern Italy and this was reminiscent of the area from which they came. There was the river Po in Italy, here the Russian River. You had the rolling hills and of course it wasn't as we see it. There was a lot of forestation on the property in 1860. It was a pretty wild land. But Sbarbaro had the perception of knowing what was underneath those trees. So he started it and originally they grew just about everything. They grew wheat, olive trees—these are still there today. They had citrus groves, and there are still remnants of citrus trees at Asti, they were more or less self-supporting, self-sustaining as a community. So when they could get a fair price for their grapes, and there weren't too many wineries, they decided to make wine. The first wine, I believe was made in 1885 or 86. In 1887, the building was constructed and you'll see Italian Swiss Agricultural Colony and the date 1887 on the building and hopefully it's still there. Wine World won't destroy it, but their predecessors...

Mosher: Allied?

Vercelli: Allied, no, the period between Allied and Wine World. That period of time when Early had it, Early Industries called themselves Beverage Source. They desecrated the name by





not dropping the Italian Swiss, that was the Early Olive people.

Davis: Where was this sign?

Vercelli: It's on a building. And I hired a painter to repaint it, I don't remember what year it was when I was plant manager, I had Rudy Phug paint it. He got the same type of paint, got everything there, today it'd probably be condemned as it was probably repainted with lead paint. I wanted something that would last. He had block letters, Rudy did an excellent job. He was a sign painter up at Cloverdale. So then they made wine and it was a total failure, it turned to vinegar and so then that's when Pietro C. Rossi comes in. Rossi comes in, he was a pharmacist by profession.

Mosher: About what year was this?

Vercelli: Must have been in 1887-1888. The winery, the structure was built in 1887, but I don't know about the winemaking, whether they made wine in 1886, when they didn't make a marketable product and then in 1887, I can't answer that.

Davis: Do you know what grapes they were using? Was this Zinfandel then too?

Vercelli: When they first started off, I have their literature, they made everything there. They had Mataro, they had Beclan, they had Zinfandel, predominantly Zinfandel, particularly later on. Zinfandel was the most extensively grown grape in Sonoma County for years and years. I have proof of that. In my library I have the growers that existed, their names, some of them had distilling facilities that made brandy and there's a list of the grapes that they were growing. But the predominant grape at that time...

Mosher: I might be able to pick it out. Mataro, you said, Mondeuse.

Vercelli: Mondeuse, Mataro, I never knew Mataro was known as Mouvedre in France as it is today, of course, with the Rhone deal. Mataro was more or less a semi-table grape and it was grown, and is still grown, in the [San Joaquin] valley. It's the basis for a lot of port production. A big, heavy producing grape, a Rhone variety.

Mosher: So the Rossis had...



- Vercelli: They had white grapes, Chasselas, Sauvignon Blanc, and Sauvignon Vert. I never saw Chardonnay to any great extent. From the early literature it wasn't extensively grown.
- Mosher: They may have planted it in a region too hot and it didn't do well. Maybe they tried it, because it certainly has been responsible for the great white Burgundies for centuries. It seems to me that it would have been one that would have been brought over by Haraszthy and they would have tried it, but maybe they put it up here or in Northern Napa and it just didn't do very well.
- Vercelli: I visited two wineries yesterday. One was the Hess collection and the other was St. Supery. At St. Supery I was astounded. They must have a direct pipe line to Fort Knox. But that collection of grape, etchings of grapes, beautiful. In color, absolutely beautiful. I never saw anything like it. Varieties, I had never heard anything of like that. I knew that there were more Bouschet's than Alicante, but they had prints of them on the wall.
- Mosher: Did they have a red juice too?
- Vercelli: I assume so. In addition, there's Salvador and Grande Noir that have red juice.
- Davis: You were talking about Pietro Rossi coming in.
- Vercelli: Pietro C. Rossi had twin sons, Robert and Edmund that later became involved in the wine industry. Carlo was the youngest son, he is a Jesuit Priest today. He's well up in his 80's. He would really give you the story of the whole family, while he's still alive and he's still sharp. He was a professor at the University of Santa Clara and he was at University of San Francisco. I think he's living in residency at the University of San Francisco. Pietro Rossi's great-grandson is living in Santa Rosa. He's the chairman of the drive working on the restoration of El Carmelo Chapel at Asti.

In 1896, you had formation of the California Wine Association. The California Wine Association was formed by two accountants. They had worked in San Francisco, I believe they were Englishmen and they had worked in San Francisco for various wine producers, wholesalers. So they had the books of all these people and they had a sense of what was going on in the industry. I think you had a recession or depression in the early 1890's. So they formed the California Wine Association. To combat that organization, the Italian Swiss Colony formed a marketing organization, the



California Wine Makers Corporation, independent of the Italian Swiss Colony per se. And they fought from 1896 to 1914. In 1914, the First World War broke out in Europe and the Italian Swiss had to give in and become a part of the California Wine Association. The President of the California Wine Association at the time was Sophus Federspeal. I met him in the early part of the 1930's.

So Edmund Rossi became the manager of the Italian Swiss at Asti and Robert was the manager of the Italian Swiss in San Francisco, but they were employees of the California Wine Association. When Prohibition came about in 1919, the California Wine Association formed a company called CALWA, the contraction of the California Wine Association. They were an agency or company created to liquidate the assets of this huge cartel of the California Wine Association. So they sold the Asti property—1600 acres—and all their plants up here in Sonoma County to the Seghesio family. The Seghesios owned the Italian Swiss lock, stock and barrel. One of the Seghesio granddaughters, Suzanne, one of Ed's daughters, researched an article about the family history, but didn't mention the California Wine Association selling the Italian Swiss holding to her grandfather. This information I'm telling you was not mentioned. I got my information from one of the Seghesio relatives. This information comes from Abele Ferrari. Abele Ferrari was the brother-in-law of Mrs. [Ida Seghesio] Prati and Mr. [Enrico] Prati was the field foreman. He came from the Argentines, he came from Italy via Argentina. He had served some time in the military. I worked under him and I'm glad I did because he was a tough guy to work for. He was a staunch disciplinarian and everyone kind of condemned the man. I didn't mind the man, although I didn't believe in all of his philosophy. He used to have us stand up on our own time. He brought unionism into Sonoma County because of his, I don't want to say abuse, but his stern principles which weren't accepted at the end of the Depression or during the Depression and the outbreak of better living conditions in the late '30's. They were one of the first commercial plants organized in Sonoma County, primarily because of Prati's management methods.

Mosher: Martini-Prati, is this the same fella?

Vercelli: That's his father, Ed Prati's father. He treated me well and I had no complaint with him, but they all considered him a pretty tough guy.

So when the Seghesios owned the property, he took in many Italians, many relatives. He sold them a few shares here and





a few shares there, sold them all stock. Abele Ferrari named some of the stockholders, the Zanzis, the Ferraros, the Ferraris, many Italians in here that were interrelated, they all bought a little bit of stock. Then the Rossis came in and bought a little stock, Alfred Sbarbaro bought a little stock, but he wasn't a big factor. The Rossis were a factor. They came into the picture at that time because they weren't in the position to buy the plant back. Seghesio bought the plant and dickered with the Rossis, the Rossis dickered with the Seghesios. Enrico Prati became the largest single independent stockholder with 12 + % of the stock when they sold to National Distiller in 1946. The other Rossis had 12%, but there was a fraction of stock more in Prati's possession. All together, of course, the sale of the property at that time was brought about by DeGeorgio who owned 37% of the stock. Then you had a lot of other minor stock holders, the Wall family, the descendants of Rossi had small shares, or small interest in stock.

Well, when I went to work in August of 1933, Frank Seghesio was the field man when Prati, who was Seghesio's brother-in-law, was the operational manager. In October of that year, Frank Seghesio resigned because he sold his \$60,000 of stock to a fella by the name of A. J. Merle.

A. J. Merle was a friend of Joe Durham. Joe Durham was an attorney in San Francisco who worked for the Public Administrator's Office and who was a personal friend of our family. When my father bought the property, that we still own on Vienna Street, he bought it from the Public Adminstrator, William J. Hynes. William J. Hynes' attorney was Joseph E. Durham. Joseph E. Durham, who was married at the time to a Spanish girl, wanted to adopt me when I was four and a half years old as they were childless. He guided me all through life. Whenever I had a problem, I went to Joe Durham. Whenever I went downtown, I went to Joe Durham. Joe Durham made life worthwhile. I was able to go to a St. Mary's-Santa Clara football game, which was the BIG GAME, it rivaled Stanford-Cal, at Ewing Field in San Francisco, through the auspices of Joe Durham. I saw Bronco Negursky at Ewing Field in 1926 with Ernie Nerver with Joe Durham. He bought me a football helmet four times my size. I had a chest protector, a big mitt. Joe Durham took me to the Olympic Club when I was six or seven years old, maybe younger, and put on boxing gloves for a curtain raiser at an amateur fight sponsored by the club. I went to work for the Durham family at the age of 14, I worked in the concession department of the Oakland Baseball Park. Joe Durham, Sr. had three sons—Joe Durham, Jr. was the attorney, Frances



was the doctor and Arthur was the dentist, they all lived in San Francisco. They were part of San Francisco's clique. So he in turn kind of guided me through life.

Since Joe Durham was a close friend of A. J. Merle, they would ask me questions and I was the mediator between and the source of information to A. J. Merle as to what was going on, how we were treated, what grapes we were buying. I don't know what happened to A. J.'s stock or how long he was involved. I never met A. J. , but the name stood in my mind. So I name a place, a time, an incident. And all of this, if you look back in the records, if you care to look at the records, you can see what happened to that stock in October of 1933. No references were made of that in Suzanne's research.

Davis: So she omitted that whole part of the chapter.

Vercelli: I don't think it was made available to her. I don't think she knew. It wasn't written. Abele Ferrari, a member of the family, and a real sharp individual, he reacted to the times and he named people. He actually named them. None of that was recorded. But if you go back to maybe 1920, 1921, go to the courthouse or someone who wants to go to the courthouse and see if there were property transfers or if you want to go to the Secretary of State and see about that. If you have time and you'd like to do something, that would really be a project. All I can cite is the people that told me what they told me.

Davis: When you talk about stock, stock in what entity? I'm confused.

Vercelli: I would say the Italian Swiss Agricultural Colony. I think it existed as that. I can't tell you, here again, in the literature that you have, you can pick that up somewhere, any change from the Italian Swiss Agricultural Colony to the Italian Swiss Colony.

Mosher: They dropped the "Agricultural" part because there were no longer olives and other things, there were just grapes at that point and winemaking.

So it was during this period, that the Seghesios more or less faded from the picture and the Rossis took it over.

Vercelli: That's correct. The Rossis came in and then there's Alfred Sbarbaro that came in on a management standpoint and the Rossis took over. Now, the Rossis, when Prohibition came about, no one expected the damage of Prohibition. No one realized the damage caused by Prohibition until they started





to restart, until it was repealed. When it was Repealed in the wine industry, they thought that the consumption of wine was going to be similar to that which existed in 1920, that they would primarily drink table wine.

Consequently, in 1928 when Alfred Smith ran for the Presidency of the United States on the Democratic ticket, he vowed to bring about the Repeal of Prohibition. That was a part of the Democratic platform. But he was defeated, he didn't come in. So based on this position, the Rossis made quite a bit of grape juice because they could convert it. Now both the Rossi sons, but Edmund in particular, had technical knowledge, Robert was more on the financial end and Ed was on the production end during their association with the California Wine Association.

Mosher: Prohibition and the making of grape concentrate.

Vercelli: Yes. So they were making the grape concentrate in 1928, they made grape juice. I inherited some of that juice five years later, seven years later in 1933. We had grape juice that had 700 parts per million and whether you believe this or not, it was still fermenting, the damn thing always had bubbles. There was an organism that would grow at 700 parts which is higher. You can't believe it, but it happened—I know—I analyzed the wine, we knew that we had 700, we knew that it was fermenting very, very slowly, we knew we had residual alcohol. So then when Roosevelt was elected in 1932, which was four years later, the Democrats came in and they repealed Prohibition.

Mosher: Let me digress just for a second. What was the quality of the wine made back then? In other words, how good was the wine that was made from juice and concentrate? I mean, sure it had alcohol, but was it wine as we know it today?

Vercelli: It wasn't anything—First, it was extremely light in color, it had no body—But who knew anything about the quality of wine? What is the measure of quality?

Mosher: Did it taste anything like the Italian wine that people made?

Vercelli: Well, no. Because the Italian wine that you made at home was a blockbuster, it was a "Dago Red". It spilled out on the table, it stained the table. No, the wine that we made in that period of time, no, it wasn't anything like what is made today. No, the wine that was made from the grape concentrate or grape juice, it certainly didn't have any of the nuances that you find in today's wines.



Mosher: That's what I figured.

Davis: You were saying that you didn't realize the effect that Prohibition had.

Vercelli: Yes. First, going back to Repeal. We figured we were going to start right off drinking and producing table wine. But we made a mistake. The alcoholic consumers were used to gin, bathtub gin. You bought a little vial of coloring, a little vial of flavoring matter, you got alcohol, sometimes it was wood alcohol and it would make you blind or killed you, but anything as long as it had alcohol... and you flavored it. The public wanted sweet wine.

The Italian Swiss didn't have any real stills. The stills that the Italian Swiss had up here were pot stills primarily for the production of commercial brandy. They only had one small continuous still and that was put on in 1934. There was nothing to produce brandies up here other than these pot stills, and they missed the boat. They had a plant in Clovis, down in Fresno, but they did not prepare themselves for the rude awakening that the consumer wanted sweet wines to get a buzz on. What they wanted was sherry, Muscat, Madera, Tokay. Who ever heard of White Port! According to Andrew Vicander, a pre-Prohibition chemist, stated that White Port was a creation of a winemaker by the name of Simrach in charge at Lachman Jacob's Winery (part of the California Wine Association) on the Petaluma Slough.

Meeting and working under Vicander was a milestone in my life. He worked for the Krenz Still manufacturing concern. Krenz is a copper and brass works in San Francisco. They made stills during Prohibition that were exported—to the Philippines—and everywhere we had sugar being produced, Krenz Company would build stills and Vicander would travel abroad and erect those stills. He worked as a consultant for Italian Swiss and he taught me a great many things. He gave me a lot of history.

To sell their product, the Italian Swiss had to buy sweet wines. They brought dessert wines, they had the Tarpey plant and the Clovis plant. Tarpey is another fella we want to talk about too, because he was prominent in the California wine industry prior to Prohibition. So Italian Swiss bought wines from DeGeorgio. This was difficult for them, not having sufficient cash flow, so DeGeorgio acquired an interest, 37% interest in the Italian Swiss. When the Second World War came about, the Italian Swiss owned a pot full of money to



the Bank of America. The bank undoubtedly felt uncomfortable with the size of the loan with the War on, conditions being what they were, and they undoubtedly forced the sale. It was more or less prompted by DeGeorgio. DeGeorgio wanted to get out from under owning 37% of the stock and the other three fellas having 37% of the stock weren't in the position to buy him out. So the sale came about and they sold to National Distillers.

Mosher: From misreading the market.

Vercelli: Yes, they just misread the market. And then you'll find the other people, Roma Wine Company, which started here in Healdsburg, survived. One of the founder's, Martin Scatena, daughters died just two months ago. Martin Scatena was founder of the Roma Wine Company which started right in Healdsburg, moved to Manteca, then Lodi, then to around Fresno.

Mosher: I remember that, I remember Roma Wine, sure, when I was a kid they had a big piece of the market.

Vercelli: A great big piece, they and Italian Swiss.

Davis: What was different about Roma, did they read the market better?

Vercelli: Well, yes. They had the dessert wines. Roma Wine had dessert wines, Italian Swiss didn't have the wines. The Italians had no distilling facilities up here. They couldn't afford to buy local grapes for dessert wine production. I know that grapes sold as low as \$4.00 a ton in San Joaquin Valley.

Mosher: Wow.

Vercelli: Down in the area of Fresno there were a lot of packing plants. Whenever you had a rain down there and your raisins didn't dry out, then where did they go? They went to the distillery. The distilling facilities that we had at Asti were antiquated. I.S.C. didn't have anything with a rectifying column. You had small pot stills. And who had any ability to anticipate?

Then the distillers moved in, Seagrams moved in, Schenley moved in. Schenley withstood the heat of the kitchen, so to speak, for what, 21 years? Seagrams is still in the industry today. They still have Mt. Tivy, they are a factor in the California brandy field. So when the Italian Swiss sold out to National Distillers, I don't think, and this is just a personal observation, I never saw their books, but I would venture to





say that the I.S.C. stockholders got little or no money upon the liquidation of their debt in contrast to their efforts and their contributions. When you divide three ways or four ways or several dozen ways, the small stockholders was the loser. Whereas the Cella family owned their winery lock, stock, and barrel and they got a pot full of money [when they sold] from Schenley, which they were able to retain. The retention of the stock of the Italian Swiss was relatively nil when they liquidated their indebtedness.

Mosher: I'm interested in the quality aspects, too. I would have thought there were enough Mediterranean people, Italians, French, Spanish, Greek, Yugoslavs, people who drank wine everyday as a part of lifestyle who, when the Repeal of Prohibition came about, would have liked the table wine, not just the fortified wines. But they weren't there?

Vercelli: In the 13 year period of Prohibition, who today could remember what little Cabernet we had, little did they remember that. They all made wine at home. They all made, with few exceptions, inferior wine. For instance, when you talk of the Greeks, here again, they were used to Retsina. The Sonoma Mission Wine Company on McCallister Street, in San Francisco. I would sell them white wine. He would give me the order about two or three weeks in advance. First, I would go over to the Healdsburg Lumber Company and I would say, "Will you please save all the pitch that comes in on your fir cuttings?" And they would save all the fresh pitch. I drove my ton and a half Dodge truck down there to deliver the five or the ten barrels of white wine. So, I would go in with a coffee can of fresh pitch that I'd give to Mr. Andrews, his name was Andriolikus but it was changed to Andrews. I would give it to Mr. Andrews and he would add so much pitch to each barrel of white wine. He'd take the bung out and added it, so that then **he** took the risk of paying a fine for adulterating wine. I brought him the stuff, but I had nothing to do with it. I guess I could be considered in a court of law a conspirator—

So getting back to the quality, we had no standard of measure other than the French wines. Here again, we don't know the *quality* of the French wines. As at that time, the French could absorb all their wines. They only sent us stuff their premium market couldn't handle. Consequently, it's difficult, again, to say much about the quality of the wine. Let's see—it was palatable, it was drinkable, you didn't hear anyone losing their ears, their noses didn't drop off because of the consumption of the wine. But they must have made some product that was acceptable because they drank it. Getting



back to the home winemaking, many of the people adapted themselves to drinking wine that wouldn't meet the California standards of volatile acidity, .120 grams per hundred cc. But you could find a 1% vinegar with maybe ten times that legal volatile acidity and still they thought that you went into their house and they would pour this wine out and —Ugh.

Mosher: That was the "Dago Red."

Vercelli: Another problem today I have complained about in the industry, we don't age wines to their best. We're marketing Cabernet Sauvignons when they are much, much too green. They're too raw, they're full of tannin. When you can taste a good Cabernet Sauvignon that doesn't have that tannin, that is 5, 10, 15 years old, they're delightful. But here, yesterday, they served us a 1989 Merlot that took the enamel off my teeth.

Mosher: An '89 Merlot?

Vercelli: An '89 Merlot. It was absolutely horrible. They give that to these students. They say they let us taste that and the bulk of the people, I guess, didn't want it. It was at Hess, a winery in Napa Valley. It was dark, black as spades. Darkest Merlot I'd ever seen, particularly an '89 vintage.

Let's go back to the quality. In 1933, '34, '35 and '36 consider the labeling first, we produced Rhone wine, we produced Sauterne, we produced Chablis, we had some proprietary labels, and in the reds we had St. Emilion, we had all the French labels. When I went to work for Scatena Brothers Wine Company, we produced any wine that you wanted—St. Julian? Well, we went to the bin and we called up Earl Adams the printer to print so many—we had blank labels—print so many Medoc labels, print so many Burgundy labels or Chateau Nuef de Pap. And that happened in 1936. You can hardly believe it, but I experienced it, we did it. I'm surprised my knowledge of wine increased rapidly when we talked about St. Macaire and St. Emilion.

Mosher: So you learned about Bordeaux.

Vercelli: Take the leading producers of white wine, Wente. Their Sauternes were golden, they were absolutely golden, they were oxidized. The consuming public accepted that then, they accepted the sherry taste. Sherry was very prominent and accepted at that time.





- Mosher: The only thing you said they won't accept is sediment in their wines.
- Vercelli: The American public *today* won't accept sediment. You never see anyone decanter a bottle of wine in a restaurant. If there's sediment, they send it back. They just won't accept it.
- Getting back to the quality, the Italian Swiss made a very enviable reputation on Tipo Chianti. They had fought with the Italian government. First it was Tipo, and it was made from basically the three grapes that they used by law in the Chianti blend in Italy, it was made with Sangiovese, Labrusca, and Trebbiano, a white grape. The law was modified where they used Canaiolo and another variety in the Chianti blend.
- Mosher: They tried to get the white grape out of the Chianti blend?
- Vercelli: They're doing it today, yes, they're substituting, they're altering that blend, they're using, instead of Canaiolo, they're using Cabernet Sauvignon.
- Mosher: That's what I read.
- Vercelli: Yes. From the quality standpoint, quality being subjective and the nature of man being what he is, he can adapt himself. When I was a kid, I didn't like alligator pears [avocados], today I do. At first a lot of people don't like olives, but they adapt themselves to it. Our tastes change.
- Mosher: True.
- Vercelli: When I was a kid, I could eat sugar by the handful. Today, I don't use sugar in my coffee, I just enjoy a piece of chocolate once in a while. I get by. I complain about our wines being too sweet, even our Rieslings, our Chenin Blancs, I'll say they're a little too sweet for table wines. I don't think there's an affinity to food for them. So consequently, it's difficult to really try to evaluate or measure quality because of the subjectivity of mankind in general. But consumption increased. Awards were given to California wines in various competitions.
- Mosher: You're talking about Italian Swiss Colony, or in general?
- Vercelli: The industry, of those that participated, there weren't too many. In Napa Valley you had after 1900, you had Beaulieu, you had Inglenook, you had Krug, and here California Wine Association had an effect. They controlled a lot of the small



wineries. The small wineries sold their merchandise or their merchandise was marketed through California Wine Association. So California Wine Association had identity, whereas in Sonoma we had very few—we had I. (Issac) DeTurk, Italian Swiss, Fountain Grove, you had Finlaysons, you had Korbel, and that's about it. You might have had—oh, you had C. Shilling. You had a few, but nothing to speak of because of the effect of the California Wine Association. We were spread so far apart you had wine producers in Sonoma Valley, you had wine producers in Occidental, you had wine producers in Cloverdale, you had wine producers on the flats of Santa Rosa. They were all spread around. Whereas in Napa Valley, you had to go across your competitors door in order to get to the County Courthouse or in order to get out of the Valley. And then you didn't have, this is a horrible thing to say, our Italian makeup, you had more Italians in the wine business in Sonoma County, and they just couldn't get along as readily as the people who crossed your premises every day, or you crossed theirs everyday. You were more friendly with them, where as we in Sonoma County, I think we were more competitive among one another and they were more cooperative among one another. I think that was one reason why the growth of the two valleys has been entirely different. Prior to Prohibition, statistics will tell you, Napa wasn't a factor in the industry. Sonoma County was a factor in the industry, but not Napa.

So getting to the second question, the economics. Very few people manifested great wealth in the wine business in Sonoma County, but in Napa County there was some wealth there. Of course the Beringer Brothers, (founded in the 1870's) the Beringers did well, Krug did relatively well. But in Sonoma you had the Italian Swiss, (founded in 1881) Fountain Grove, Korbel and I.DeTurk and in 1896 with the formation of the California Wine Association, you had the depression, you had the 1906 earthquake, a few years later you had the First World War that became a factor, then you had 12 years of Prohibition. Some people got wealthy in Prohibition. If you can get some of these farmers here in and around Healdsburg to open up, they can tell you lots of stories as to who made a big piece of change in the industry.

Mosher: How'd they make the money during Prohibition?

Vercelli: Oh, by selling, first converting their grape into wine, from wine into brandy, and then the story I mentioned about the sugar. They all had sugar and they would throw the sugar over their pomace....



Getting back to the quality, unless I forget, and this is important, the Simi family held wine all during Prohibition and in 1934, they sold a very large lot of wine that they had held for 13 years. That wine not only acidified, but putrefied. There's a difference between putrefaction and acidification. A marked difference! Acidification is one thing, but putrefaction is something else. Stench. So I was analyzing the wine and there were ingredients in that wine that recorded as alcohol, and I don't know what they were, I didn't have the experience. I was 21, all I knew in running a distillery was you submit a report to the government that you expect to get X number of proof gallons of this product that you're going to distill. If you don't get within a reasonable tolerance of the anticipated or the projected amount, you're in trouble. So we had 16 inspectors come in one morning and close down the plant. They wanted to find out what happened to all this brandy. We sweat. We sweat blood. We had distilled this 90,000 gallons of wine and didn't get the anticipated yield. I don't remember where they all came from, all the brass from San Francisco, Mr. Vicander, and the little kid in there, how could I match my wits with Peter Veleur out of Washington, D.C., a doctor, a Ph.D.? Here's a guy that had six weeks or something or other tutored by Bioletti—How's he going to match wits? Vicander came into the picture then, that was the first time I met him. I was 21, we called him Andy Vicander.

So the industry seems to have always had ups and downs and it's very cyclical. In my experience, up until very recently, every five years you'd have something that would kind of effect the industry. Either a frost before you had the systems of frost prevention today, the wind machines, then you only had smudge pots for frost protection. You have sprinkling, you have the air machines that make air current and you have some means of frost protection. But the industry has been effected by many things, threats of other outside forces. In 1952, it was the Korean Conflict. Before we went through the First World War, hence Prohibition, and with World War II, with many controls and restrictions. We had only one style, one color, one size, one finish wine container called the Victory Fifth. Herman Wenthe put a cork in it and than a screw cap on top. It was used for table wine, it was used for dessert wine, it was used for everything. That's all you could get, the glass people were too busy making glass for the war effort and there was a shortage of manpower. So consequently, you had the Victory Bottle. I'd like to get one. Somewhere along the line, we ought to go to the Owen Illinois Glass Company, Owen, Illinois. You'd have to go to someone that could trace the Victory bottle. But with the bottle it gave





you enough money to hold on for a period of time. You had the War Production Board that governed you, you had price control. If you had a good lawyer, you could come out with a new label and get a new, better price. But if you didn't have a good lawyer and didn't know how to get around, you had to use your old label and you were stuck with a fixed price that you couldn't do anything about.

So what happened in Sonoma County in the 1938? Here you had the Prorate.

Mosher: I was going to ask you about the Prorate.

Vercelli: We'll go into the Prorate. It's very important. Of course, brandy was made. The War breaks out in '39, we go to War in '41 and there's someone sitting with a hell of a lot of brandy with the right of refusal. Who had one of the largest distilling operations other than Schenley? Julio and Ernie Gallo. So they have an opportunity of buying this aged brandy, aged at the government's cost, they got paid for aging the brandy, they got paid to buy the barrels. And who comes along with the opportunity of buying that tremendous inventory in their hands? Look at the start that they had.

Mosher: That kept them going.

Vercelli: Gallo had the acumen of bringing in molasses to produce alcohol for the war effort. Very few people, other than the large distillers, brought in molasses during the Second World War.

Getting back to your question about how profitable had the industry been. It never was really. Today it's an entirely different picture. You have diversified capitalists, you have people that have tremendous amounts of wealth, all these international corporations, Schenley, you have the advent of the Japanese. Who'd ever dream 20 years ago the Japanese would be involved. But it never has been, to the best of my knowledge, it has never been a very lucrative industry, it is very cyclical.

Mosher: So it's always been "The best way to make a small fortune in the wine business was to start with a large fortune."

Vercelli: That's right, that is correct. You start with a large fortune, you can make a go of it. But on a small basis, it is very, very difficult.



- Mosher: Was there money to be made, not making wine, but selling grapes?
- Vercelli: Yes, they made money selling grapes in some years and this can be confirmed. Ed Rossi made a survey, I think I have a copy of his survey in here. Right after Prohibition in 1921-'22-'23, grapes were at a good price. In '24-'25-'26, they hit a real, real low and that's when the vineyards started to come out. Between '25 and '33, we dropped down, we could have had as much as 40,000 acres of grape at one time in Sonoma County and you had about 16,000 acres, even less, maybe even as low as 11,000 acres in '33—'34. It stayed that way for a long time. It stayed that way maybe between 12-20,000 acres until about 1965, then they started replanting.
- Mosher: What kind of production were they getting from an acre? There were mostly head-pruned vines, weren't they?
- Vercelli: Yes. They were head-pruned vines. I would think that the standard production... but of course it varied. There were head-pruned vines and many of the vineyards were hillside, hillside didn't yield very much, but the rich valley land vineyards undoubtedly would average 6-7 ton to the acre. The stuff on the hill would average a ton, ton and a half to the acre. So I would think that the average yield would be 3-4 ton an acre.
- Mosher: I seem to recall from my knowledge of the history of the business that it used to be that people would try and deliver their fruit as high in sugar as they could get it because they'd get bonus points for sugar.
- Vercelli: That's correct. Of course, then we'd say we'd use "la gingiaroba," translated to mean the water hose. So instead of our yield being a 160-175 gallons to the ton, we'd hit 200-225.
- Mosher: If you had that sugar.
- Vercelli: That's right. If we came in with a 28 balling, we could take, what was it, 7 gallons to the degree alcohol, so if you wanted to bring it down to 22, you added 42 gallons of water. So if you're getting 160 and you added 42 gallons of water, you're now getting 202....
- Mosher: No one would tell you about this, but that's what they were doing, right?
- Vercelli: Well, first of all, it was the consumer that bought your product whether you delivered it at 22 or whether you



delivered it at 26. And for you to pay to buy 26 was a cheap source of buying sugar. You couldn't chapetalize legally and theoretically you couldn't reduce the acidity which was being reduced here legally, but still it was done. It was common practice.

Mosher: But could you adjust your acidity back up?

Vercelli: Yes, using tartaric and citric acids, surely.

Mosher: Was there ever a scandal that you know of about people chapetalizing?

Vercelli: No. The only scandals that come to mind were during the Second World War when you had an influx of some characters that came into the industry. Gusmano was one. There were three of them, two of the three went to jail. They had a contracting relationship with a winery in Riverbank. They would weigh the same grapes twice. They went over the scale twice. The same fella's grapes—they would go up here, they'd go up a block and someone else would drive the truck over. Or they would take off the top layer of grapes and then put in 10 or 12 to 20 boxes of top grapes and then go over the same scale, get a weight certificate then they'd send it to the office of Asti and Uncle Sam would say, "Hell, you got 1400 ton of grape, where's the wine?"

Getting back to the economics, it has always been a struggle and we never operated a business by trying to build up reserves. First, let's go back. We never determined as an industry, that I'm aware of, we never determined a method of selling by our cost. We sold by what our competition did. If the selling price of wine was, let's say, for a case of fifths was \$20.00, then of course, Joe Dokes sold at \$20, we would sell at \$20. This was exemplified in my experience at Souverain. When I went to work at Souverain in 1978, I found out that we were selling wine to Ernie's Liquor Store for \$12 a case and Max Chodes, our accountant, says, "That wine cost you \$18 a case, why and the hell do we sell it for \$12 a case?" Well, McCarthy, their salesman, figured the market was \$12 a case, that's what the market is. Well, how did they determine the market? Max Chodes was a great man, I learned a great deal from him. And that is why we were able to bring Souverain for a short period of time to profitability because we sold as predicated. It cost us so much for this, so much for this, so much for that. And then that was Y, so we wanted Y plus 5% that was profit. And so that's what we endeavored to do. Not just because Joe Dokes sold his Chenin Blanc at that much.





From the standpoint of economics, this is very interesting, when I worked for Petri's, they put a plant manager on a profit sharing program, whereby you received X pounds of sugar over here and was converted to Y proof gallons of alcohol. So you had so much sugar and that the conversion factor of sugar to alcohol was .57. You take that off, say you take seven hundredths off so it's 50-50. So if you have 24 sugar over here, you should get 12% alcohol over here or a fraction thereof. So at the end of the year when they closed their books, all the grapes you purchase, all the wines you had, all converted to a common denominator—proof gallons, and when you hit 92-95%, you're doing pretty well. When you hit 90% or 88%, you'd better look for a new job. But when you hit this higher rate, you pick up a bonus, pick up \$2,000-\$3,000. The Petri Family were the only proprietors that I know that employed this procedure. I don't know of any other winery that did that, it's a good concept. You measure your efficiency. If so many gallons of wine go down the sewer, that comes out of this figure here. When you have an accident, and you don't report it, you try to cover it up—you report the accident, an "Act of God", the Petri's would give you slack, an accident has happened, or you lost 14,000 gallons in Tank 65 when you had the earthquake or something like that. That came into the picture, but otherwise it depends on your ability. And for 17 years that I was connected to production at Asti, their unit costs went down. And that's a matter of fact. But it was a lot of self-sacrifice and what not, and it was building a team. "No man is an island." You can have the best people at the head of a company, but if you don't have the executioners, you don't get off the ground. You can have the best ideas in the world, but if you don't have some guy that can carry those out the way you want them, it doesn't do you any good. God took Louis Petri long before his time. There's an oral history on him that's worth while reading, it's very, very interesting. He had the Midas touch, everything he touched was a success, San Jose Steel, he had the S&W brand foods, made a fortune in six months, bought it, and sold it.

Mosher: I'm still fascinated by the economics of this thing. To me winemaking and grape growing must have been a labor of love for a lot of people because if they weren't getting rich at it, it certainly seems there's a lot of people awfully devoted and dedicated to the industry for an industry that doesn't pay very well.

Vercelli: You said that the industry does not pay well. But it has some mysticism. Anyone that works through a vintage gets



wrapped up in something that is intangible. It's hard to explain. You like it. You don't complain. When we fortified wine at Asti and we needed the tank for another fortification, you had six inches of muck in that tank, you didn't send another fella in, you had the fan going from up above, you have the suction from above, the fan blowing from underneath, and you had to get that tank emptied. So you put a rope around your stomach and you put a knot so it wouldn't slip, and then you went into the tank with a great, big rubber squeegee and you emptied it...So we could empty the tank so that the night crew could make another fortification. Today, you have OSHA that wouldn't let you do that, you'd probably have the health department and other agencies that would prevent this.

Mosher: You have employees who say, "Hey, I've already worked 8 hours, I'm not working anymore."

Vercelli: That's it. But anyone that has been wrapped up in the wine business is kind of anesthetized with the mysticism that is so difficult to explain. The smell. To get on the tank, to put a thief in a bubbling cap of must and have that thing shoot up 16 inches, you get an aroma that is most enticing.

Mosher: I love that.

Vercelli: It certainly was like freshly mowed hay. I can attest to that. It's remarkable, it must have cost a fortune to do that.

Mosher: Do you know who the GM at St. Supery is? The General Manager is Michela Rodeno.

Vercelli: Whom I turned down for a job at Inglenook to work in a hospitality room...(laughing) in the mid '70's.

Mosher: That's about right. Then she went to Domaine Chandon, you know. So she started with John Wright and now....

Let me digress for a second. One thing I found interesting was you were talking about fruit quality and how you don't want your fruit to be overly ripe because you get plummy, jammy qualities in the wine, the wine isn't sharp, is kind of faded and past its prime. I remember listening to Zelma Long one time talking about how you know from the weather, when to expect your harvest. You can test the fruit with a refractometer, or whatever. But she said that the best way to test your fruit is to go out there and take a berry and pull the stem off of it. The ease with which the stem comes off the fruit tells you the degree of ripeness that it is. And if you



have an educated touch and you know what you are doing, you can taste it, you can look at your calendar and you can know. Then you test it by pulling the berry off the stem. And you add all these things up and you know about the time when you can harvest your fruit because the fruit tells you, if you know how to look at it and assess it.

Vercelli: Likewise knowing your vineyard. You go in and you squeeze the grape. When it gives, you know it is mature. You can't say it is 22 or 23. You know that it is not 20. You know it is definitely not 20. And if it is 20, you know that it is still firm and it still won't give and you know it's not ready.

Mosher: Another week or so.

Vercelli: But that requires a great deal of conscientious studying, like you compare that field with a refractometer reading. You do it for five years and then you can kind of do it in your sleep.

Mosher: Yeah, that's what she was saying. You add all that up and then you get the good picture of when you should harvest because there's a window there. You can have all the sugar, but the grapes, maybe there was too much heat, it's too early. And you sugar levels get up to 22, 22 1/2% and the sugar says you should pick it, but the fruit hasn't been out long enough to be really fully mature so that the acids and all the other ingredients in the grapes aren't quite fully, not quite mature enough. The maturation has to be protracted to a point where the fruit is mature. It's not just sugar, it's maturity of fruit.

Vercelli: Very true.

Mosher: So the acids and sugars are kind of important, but there's other components too.

Vercelli: When you look at that concept and going back to your question earlier about quality, we didn't have the acumen then that we have today. Today with that at our disposal if we wish to use it. This also affects the economics. Italian Swiss' research staff consisted of very few people. When Heublein bought it, they brought in a doctor, I don't remember his name, he lasted for a while. First they changed presidents. Bonomo lasted 14 months. They brought in some doctor of research. He lasted 6 months. The turn over was terrific. They never were able to finance a research department. The only ones that really did anything in research were the Gallos. I visited their premises two years ago and they had 37 winemakers on their staff—37 little cubby holes. They have more knowledge than the University





of California and Fresno State combined. They have more knowledge, they just don't publicize that. I just learned last night as I was reading *Wine Advisor* or it was the *P.D.* (Press Democrat), that the Gallo Foundation gave \$250,000 to some project at Fresno State. In fact, I never knew they had a foundation. I knew they were philanthropists, but I never knew they gave that kind of money.

End of Tape One.

Tape 2 July 1, 1990

Mosher: This is the second session on tape. We're going to pick it up right now with Joe telling an anecdote in response to some questioning and some lively discussion with Eric with his recent interview with Mr. (Francis) Passalacqua. So he wants to elucidate and clarify something here that seems very interesting. We're going to start not in some kind of sequential order, but we're going to pick it up right here with this little anecdote.

Vercelli: There was a house in New York, by the name of Giavi & Company, they were brokers for several California wineries, but their main winery was Scatena Brothers Wine Company in Healdsburg, of which I was an employee as General Manager and winemaker. Many restrictions were placed upon the industry during the War years from about 1940, late '41, early '42 until the War ended sometime in '46, these restrictions were placed upon us by several government agencies. One agency was the Office of Price Administration, where a product could not be sold higher than it had been sold prior to the War. And so consequently, devious methods were devised to increase prices, that if there was a new label or there was an alteration of the label, that could indicate that it was a different product, then they could get a higher price.

So this firm approached me as I was self-employed. It was difficult to get bottling supplies and the like, but the fact that the War Production Agency had given me an AAA priority, I could buy metals, like copper and steel and things of that nature, and under this priority I was able to acquire glass that other vintners could not acquire. Since I could not increase my price, we decided to buy wine from the Soda Rock Winery in bulk, and then I would get a fee for packaging it. The dealings were between Giavi & Company and Soda Rock, but Giavi wasn't a California producer. Therefore, I acted as his agent to buy the wine from Soda Rock and then package the wine and sell it. So consequently, all the official documents were in the name of Vercelli Brothers Wine Company.



I don't recall what price was paid to Soda Rock Winery, but it was relatively high. My profit was coming from the standpoint of labor and supplying the packaging materials. Then the price of bulk wines dropped. Giavi reneged on his commitment, so I got stuck because all of the legal documents were in my name. I couldn't absorb the prices, because I was getting my monies from the transaction, and consequently, we had some very unpleasant experiences with the Ferrari family and it resulted in a lawsuit. This was one of the few times in all my 57 years was I ever sued, but it was settled and it never came to a hearing.

So what you were telling me now about Francis (Passalacqua) devising this contract to permit the increase in the price of wine as a result of his contract, that he dealt with an out-of-state winery, but it was also legal—well, legal—it was *used* in California and that it wasn't only common to me, many people did, because there were not too many bottling houses at that time, so few you could name them. In Healdsburg, I think you had Foppiano, Vercelli, and I think that's about all. Then Simi, didn't do very much. And then in Sonoma County, of course, you had the Italian Swiss, Korbel as bottlers. I don't think Sebastiani was bottling at that time in '42, he was primarily a bulk house.

Mosher: I think that's correct.

Vercelli: So, that's interesting that Francis brought that to mind.

Moser: What was the intent of the law that said that you couldn't sell it for more than you did prior to the War?

Vercelli: So you wouldn't increase the price of products and bring about inflation.

Moser: I see. So basically it was a *lid on*, to keep inflation down.

Vercelli: It was to keep inflation down and to keep prices down because you had a shortage of manpower, you had a shortage of supplies. I, fortunately, had been bottling, other people could not start a bottling plant because they had no allocation of glass, had no track record to buy glass. So consequently, it was difficult for someone to start up. Of course, the lack of manpower, so anyone who bottled, for example, Foppiano—Foppiano probably did the same thing, he probably had the same experience.



Fortunately, I had three labels, I had Verbro (contraction of Vercelli Brothers), which was a very competitive label, Vercelli which was an in-between pricing structure, then I had Alpine, but maybe 2% of our entire sales were Alpine. I couldn't automatically convert my products from 2% to 70 or 80 or 100% of the business under the new pricing structure, because I didn't have the track record of selling that quantity of Alpine brand wine. It would be an open subterfuge if I turned everything over to Alpine overnight.

Mosher: And they would have acknowledge that and got you for it. When did the ban come off so that it was then possible for the free market to determine price?

Vercelli: Shortly thereafter.

This is important while it's on my mind, talking about pricing. Pricing restrictions were solely in the United States, for sales in the U.S. So consequently, I thought I was a *smart guy* because there were no restriction on exports. I had a firm called the American Commerce Company in San Francisco that acted as brokers. They took my line of wines, both Vercelli Brothers and Alpine, as well as representing us in the sale of bulk wine. They were food brokers, they had accounts in, what we call today, the Pacific Rim. They had accounts in Tahiti, in New Caledonia, and the colony of Macao, off the China Coast, and in Central American countries. Payment was based on the pound sterling. That was their coin. Not including the Central American countries, Guatemala, San Salvador or Uruguay. They didn't do a great deal of business there, but we did a great deal of business in the French colonies of Papete in Tahiti and in Noumea, New Caledonia. I had a friend, Willie Bagnani, who would receive Vercelli brand wines in New Caledonia. I could get whatever the market demanded. I would receive my documents and bills of lading and all the certification for export and I would send them to the bank, I think it was a Canadian Bank, I don't remember the name, in Montreal, Canada. Everything was shipped on an order bill of lading. So the minute I got a signed bill of lading, I'd send it back by wire and I'd get my money right away, didn't have to wait two months. All this was handled by the American Commerce Company, they were the export brokers. Sometime during this period, the countries went off the pound sterling and so I had to take the payment in the coin of the realm, a different standard for whatever country it was, like the peso. The monetary standard of the country. We didn't want to be paid in French Francs in Noumea, we had created this business in anticipation of retaining it after the War was over. But





shortly before the War was coming to the end, these Central American countries and these people with whom we were doing business and had been paid by the bank of Canada, went off the monetary standard—so we quit doing business immediately. We lost the entire market, we made a mistake. This was a serious mistake in hoping that we could have continued after the War. Of course, much of this was bulk wine. We sold a lot of bulk wine to the French in New Caledonia and the City of Noumea.

Mosher: Now, was this ban that was on prices on wine also in effect for other products as well, all foods and such...

Vercelli: As far as I remember, yes.

Mosher: So this was an attempt after the War to kind of phase back to a peace-time economy, so there wouldn't be rampant inflation because there were shortages because of the War, manpower shortages, materials shortages, and so on?

Vercelli: This was during the War and it stopped even before the War ended, when we saw that the War was coming to an end, it happened like that (snaps)!

Mosher: What was the psychology of the American public at this time in regards to wine and spirits? Did they—I mean having been deprived of distilled spirits during the War effort, were they going hog wild after the War, or was it just kind of something that was down-keyed and underplayed, there wasn't much of a hullabalou.

Vercelli: It was very down-keyed and underplayed. It took us a few years to overcome the effects of the War. When the War terminated, it terminated very abruptly and the economic conditions brought about by the termination of the War weren't very good. The price of our commodity, wine, declined again for a period during 1942, say to 1946-48, while the price of grapes increased each year because of the shortage. I can recall; let me cite my personal examples. In December of 1946, I remember it distinctly, in December of 1946, the market in bulk wines started to drop. I was sitting on a cellar full of wine, wine that I had produced at my place and I had wine stored in Sausal's which was Ferrari's [at that time], Pedroncelli, Vinland, which was a small winery—it was the old Vadon Winery. In 1946, we paid as much as \$150 a ton for grapes, which gave us a cost of wine of about a dollar and a dime, \$1.10 on the scale, less our production charges. When I finally sold that wine, I had offers for the wine for several year later till 1947-48 from \$1.10 cost. So basically in 1946,



the market was about \$1.25 to \$1.35 at the time that we crushed this grape. We thought that the market would maintain itself. I'm talking about bulk wines. I sat on the oldest wine and when the price of wine dropped, it cost me a dollar and a dime on the scale. We were in about a \$1.25 market. The market started to drop, but instead of dropping slowly in small sequences, say 5-10 cents a gallon, it dropped two bits maybe from \$1.25 to \$1.00, from \$1.00 it went to \$.75. And so consequently, I didn't have the acumen to beat the market down, to be one of the first to get that price as the market dropped as low as \$.40. When the bank called their loan in the best we could get for the product we had on hand was \$.12 from Louis Bennoit, he was president of Almaden Madrone at that time, and Lawrence Warehousing was a financing institution that would give you money for warehouse receipts, a practice which was common for a few years right after the War. And \$.20 from Ernest and Julio Gallo. So consequently, we called sort of a creditors committee and Jeff Peyser, who was counsel for the Wine Institute, I went to him and told him...This was a private group that wanted to offer assistance, I owed the Pacific National Bank \$330,000, which was a lot of money.

Mosher: Back then that was like a couple three million.

Vercelli: A lot of money. So when they realized they could not recover their loan at liquidation prices—they were forcing me to liquidate because I wasn't reducing my loan. These industry members wanted to see to it that I didn't have any financial problems like filing bankruptcy, so they formed a committee consisting of Herman Wenthe, who is a very close friend and advisor, Harry Bacigalupi, who was the president of California Products, (at one time they were involved in land, I believe, at Windsor, that subsequently became Windsor Winery somewhere along the line), Harry Caddow, who was the manager of the Wine Institute, and Jefferson Peyser, the counsel from the Wine Institute, and the people that were financing me. The Pacific National Bank was represented by a fella by the name of Dan White. He was the individual that called a commodity loan. We owned the bank a considerable amount of money, \$330,000 at the time. We could never have liquidated our inventory at \$.10 or \$.20 so this committee saw fit and offered me assistance. As a result, Herman Wenthe bought some red wine, the first wine that he ever bought from anyone, and he paid me a reasonable price. I don't recall off-hand, but it could have been anywhere from \$.60 to \$1.20. Herman had this one grape that they grew on the premises which was a Mouvedre, which is sometimes called a Mataro grape. So he bought my Zinfandel and he paid me \$1.00 and



some odd cents, he paid me cost. Harry Bacigalupi bought what other few varietals we had and paid \$1.20 a gallon, so we were able to liquidate shortly thereafter our \$330,000 loan without anyone suffering.

Mosher: Well, it seems like the margins were pretty thin if you're getting \$1.20 a gallon and the fruit was selling for what? \$150 a ton. That's barely any profit in there at all.

Vercelli: That is right. That's very right. There has always been a low profit margin.

Mosher: Thin margins.

Vercelli: —Thin margins. Going back to Prorate, at \$.07 a gallon and you're paying \$12 a ton for grapes, you could realize the margins are very slim indeed.

Davis: What did he do with the product?

Vercelli: They had marketing organizations. They were able to sell the wine. It was an infinitesimal small part of their inventories. They could absorb it. It perhaps increased the cost of their wines a few pennies with the volume they had and what little bit I sold them.

Mosher: But they could have beat you down if they wanted to!

Vercelli: Oh, yes! They could have, sure, sure.

Mosher: It's nice to hear about that kind of attitude once in awhile.

Vercelli: When I went to Jeff Peyser, who was a life long friend and counselor, and told him of my plight, my financial plight, he says, "If you have any idea of going through bankruptcy, I'll kick your \*&@\* out of a three story window! But if your creditors force you in, we'll get the best bankruptcy attorneys that money can buy." Fortunately, we didn't have to do that.

Mosher: It's very nice to hear a story where somebody didn't try and squeeze you absolutely just as hard as they can. It's nice to hear that.

Vercelli: Well, those were the members...That's what the industry consisted of in those days. You had great men like Sam Harkelroad, you had Colonel Garrison, you had L.K. Marshall, you had Horace Lanza. Incidentally, he was a living legend as far as wine contributing to longevity. He died at the age of 102-103. In talking about Perelli-Minetti ,





(Perelli-Minetti) just a few minutes ago, a relative of Julio, I don't know whether he was a brother or a cousin, but he died at over 100 years, just about three or four years ago.

Mosher: What was their personal consumption of wine? Strictly moderation, I'm sure.

Vercelli: I can't say that they (consumed).. but they certainly were good for the industry when they manifested that longevity.

Mosher: It certainly is true.

Davis: Going back a little bit, you were talking about the three labels you had, what was the first label you mentioned?

Vercelli: The first was Verbro, a contraction of the Vercelli Brothers. I have a label around here someplace or other.

Mosher: Don't let those get away, because I'm a label collector. I have a vast collection of labels.

Vercelli: Is that so, well let's see if I can find one. I think I still have one or two. Alpine I know I have one, I had the Alpine bottle here. And then the Vercelli, I have that label. Just a second, I think I can lay my hands on it...With labels, I was able to manipulate a little bit....The volume in Vercelli was fair. Little later on I'll get to that label. We were able to have our wines served or available at the 1938 International Exposition at San Francisco and then when they had the formation of the United Nations in San Francisco, we were on the wine list, we were one of the few wineries. I have that information and I'll make it available next time we meet. I'll have that out. It is very important, where we stood at the time, there was Korbel on the wine list, Colony, Alpine and I think that was all of Sonoma County's wine list. Just those three wineries were represented.

Mosher: If I could just clarify a couple of things? You had mentioned Giavi & Company?

Vercelli: Giavi were brokers. They were food and wine brokers out of New York. Which is the practice today of a lot of small wineries, they're represented by food brokers. Someone that usually has a wine...

Just yesterday, I had the pleasure of visiting Domaine Michel up here in Healdsburg. I asked how they marketed, and they said, they had three house representatives and then they go through a couple of distributors. They do business with



brokers and most of the brokers represent non-competitive lines, maybe they have a Napa Valley line, a small boutique, might have a Sonoma boutique, and then they have other products so that when they make the call they have more than one item to present to a prospective buyer. By using brokers in many instances, they don't have to get licensed in that state. The broker does the licensing and makes marketing much more inexpensive.

Mosher: I'm just curious, is the Ferrari, that you had mentioned several times, the same family of the Ferrari-Carano, the new winery that's out in Dry Creek?

Vercelli: No, no.

Mosher: That's a different family altogether?

Vercelli: Yes, entirely. Ferrari-Carano, Ferrari is the name of Don Carano's mother, or grandmother, I guess. No, the Ferrari's I'm referring to were in the Healdsburg Machine Shop. Abele Ferrari, he too had a great consumption. Of all the people I have met, I don't think that anyone had a greater consumption than Abele Ferrari. I never saw the man intoxicated, might have seen him a little happy, but never intoxicated. His consumption was absolutely enormous.

I would travel with him a great deal, sometimes we would leave home at 5 or 6 in the morning, and he would have with him his eye-opener, which was a bottle of Vermouth. So when we would make a trip from Healdsburg, we'd start early in the morning and leaving Healdsburg we'd go over the Russian River through Alexander Valley, through Napa and then home the other way by Highway 12. We'd return home at 9 or 10 at night. We visited practically all the wineries that were then available. He went out on business and I went out for the sake of learning and meeting people and trying to learn what was going on at other valleys. Abele Ferrari was a very outstanding individual. Of course, he knew all the wineries. At the time, there was no Valley Foundry available, their products weren't sold up here. So the bulk of the business in winemaking equipment was sold by Healdsburg Machine Shop, of which he was a one-third partner.

Mosher: You mentioned selling your wine. What problems occurred and what about the quality of the wine?

Vercelli: In business, there were always problems with your wine according to the buyers. They would say the wine was cloudy, if you asked for a sample they sent you back a sample of



doctored wine, because we always had analysis and we knew what we sent them or held back samples and the like. And very few of them really had problems. One that had the greatest experience was Louis Foppiano because he was one that did the bulk of the business in metropolitan New York. He was a factor, he had perhaps five to eight to ten percent of the market back there in gallon jugs. He had...I'm trying to think of the name of the company they did business with...It was Mary Migliacci owner of Colombo Wine Company.

Mosher: But these sorts of reports of bad wine were not atypical coming from the Eastern market?

Vercelli: It was always typical that there was something wrong with the product, or it turned cloudy, or it had sediment, or it was vinegar, or something like that. Just so they knocked it down in price, *but it became good* if you knocked 3 cents a gallon off.

Mosher: Then there was no real problem.

Vercelli: But that was typical business in the Eastern wine market. All the people would do that. All the people—the bulk of them did. There were very few people within the business that didn't chisel. And in many instance, payments were made with trade acceptances. You had a piece of paper and then if you would find a bank that would discounted it, you got money. If you couldn't find anyone who would discount it, you just held it until maturity and then sent it to the bank in anticipation of it being paid. It was sort of a post-dated check.

Mosher: I'm curious and want to pursue this just a little bit more about the realities of the market place. Surely, the reputation of the brokers and the buyers on the East Coast got around to the various producers and when a fellow who had a reputation, let's say of being kind of a chiseler, gave you an order, did you factor your price up a little bit knowing that he was going to beat you down on it a little bit so you'd come out a little better?

Vercelli: You couldn't very well do that because you more or less had an established price, that is, everyone knew what the market was, what brokers we had here, the market was 15 cents a gallon. It was 15 cents for just about everybody.

Mosher: So if you tried to get more, he'd run to your competitor to get it.

Vercelli: Correct. Say the market was 15, and you'd try to get 16 or 17 cents, you just didn't make the sale. Also, if you wanted cash,





cash was hard to get. They worked on your capitol, you financed your own product, and of course if you borrowed money...We had two major financing means or two major financing warehouses you had to go to. You had the Haslett Warehouse and the Lawrence Warehouse. I think the Lawrence Warehouse was associated with and financed by Bank of America.

Mosher: Where were they located, here?

Vercelli: They were located in San Francisco. But you had to pay for the wine before withdrawal. All your tanks bore a sticker stating that the wine was encumbered to the Lawrence Warehouse or the Haslett Warehouse. Lawrence was the predominant one. You had to pay before you could remove the wine, legally. Of course, you had to send in a Form 702, your monthly report to BATF, so they knew whether you removed the wine or not and you certainly couldn't fool around with Uncle Sam by keeping fictitious records.

Mosher: Well, now another part of this that seems to me to be really telling about the industry is that the buyers back East and in other locations couldn't have been too terribly concerned about the quality of the product if they were so obsessed with buying it at 15 cents and wouldn't pay 18 or 20 cents. So if Vercelli Brothers had a great reputation of giving them wine, let's say, that was of high quality, didn't ever go cloudy, they didn't have problems with it, you still found that, I guess I'm asking, did you still find that they would stick to that price? They weren't willing to pay a premium for a producer that gave them trouble free wine?

Vercelli: Very seldom.

Mosher: Everything was sold as generic wine too, wasn't it? Dry, red, Burgundy, or something?

Vercelli: Yes. The only varietal wine that we had at the time was Red Pinot

Mosher: That was pretty sweet, huh?

Vercelli: It was a dry Red Pinot. Very few of us had the ability to market a sweet wine, a wine with residual sugar, because of the subsequent problems of re-fermentation. The only way you could do it was by the use of pasteurizing which was very crude at the time, basically a hot pack, which affected the quality of the wine. It caused a burnt taste. And then upon cooling in the container it created a vacuum so it was a



vacuum pack. The other way was the use of sodium benzoate and of course, you had to declare that on the label and no one legally used it. Some people used it illegally for a period of time they had a product that was sweet and other people were trying to find out how.

Mosher: They questioned them.

Vercelli: Yes, questioned them and the Pure Food and Drug questioned them and they would analyze it, so they would run into trouble.

Mosher: So wine stabilization was a problem throughout this era. For this whole period of history, stable wine and sweet wine was difficult because of the problems of continuing fermentation, as they couldn't get the yeast out. The filtration methods weren't good enough and ...

Vercelli: We didn't have filters such as we have today, membrane filters that take out very small particles. Those weren't available to us.

Mosher: So you didn't make dry wine just because it was a wine of choice, but because it was really the only kind of stable wine that you could sell all over the county.

Vercelli: That is correct. Then getting back to the pricing—Northern California always got a little bit more than Southern California. Our region's prime competitor was Cucamonga Valley in Southern California. Cucamonga had a good name. It had a good name for the simple reason it had good sales. But they didn't have too many wineries or any appreciable large wineries in number. The reason that they would have good reception of their wine was their wines weren't as heavy as ours, or as tannic as ours. Our wines were always high in tannic content, particularly when young. Their wines were lower in total acid and lower in tannin.

Mosher: Who did these wines appeal to mostly? Certainly not Mediterranean peoples who liked their wines big and robust. They liked the Northern California wines better than the softer Cucamonga wines?

Vercelli: Yes, yes. But they wouldn't readily pay the difference of maybe a few pennies. The industry all worked on the better part of a nickel for profit. We made a profit on a nickel a gallon and were doing relatively well on this profit structure.



- Mosher: Again emphasizing that it was a labor of love because no one got rich at it.
- Vercelli: Correct.
- Mosher: Well, last time, Joe, we talked about a variety of things and skipped around somewhat. We talked about the types of grapes and the economics of the situation, we talked a bit about how wines were marketed and the psychology behind the marketing. I'm curious if you would just tell us what you know of the Volsted Act, what really went on then, not what the books might tell you as you would read it to grade school children. What really went on during the era of Prohibition? We heard about the rum-runners between Windsor and Detroit and you know, all that sort of thing, the speakeasies in Chicago. But I'm so interested in what happened to the industry here. All my life I have heard stories about several wineries that stayed open, making medicinal wine and altar wine. Now, how in the world could they stay open, because just how much medicinal and altar wine could they possibly make and be viable as a company and make some money?
- Vercelli: As I often said, we had a lot of sick people during that period of time, because doctor's prescriptions were readily available.
- Mosher: But what a ruse. They couldn't all be...
- Vercelli: But as far as altar wines being produced, I don't know of anyone that produced an altar wine in Sonoma County other than the Italian Swiss. They produced very little of it.
- Mosher: Well, the Sebastiani's claim they did.
- Vercelli: The Sebastiani's did? I was not aware of that. I know when I went to sell altar wine through the American Commerce Company in Macao, which was a Portuguese colony, I had to get permission from the Archbishop's office in San Francisco. So I tried, I tried very hard and I went through normal channels, I went and knocked on their door, and I was never granted permission. I had a friend that was very close, a doctor friend by the name of Testa. He was a medical doctor and his family had a small cigar manufacturing plant in San Francisco. Testa meaning head. T-E-S-T-A. His family, he went to Craton University. They were San Franciscans. They made the Testa cigar which was an Italian cigar. We had maybe five or six small producers, you had a fellow by the name of Bianchini, but the major producer in San Francisco at the time was Petri. And so Dr. Testa said "Joe, if you'da come to me, I think I would have arranged for you to have





sold altar wine.” Now the wine that they wanted as altar wine was purely a white table wine. It was purely a matter of paying a price. If I had made a contribution to the Church, or something of that nature...

Mosher: Quid pro quo.

Vercelli: Yes, we'd been able to sell, or maybe if my name was Cohen or something along that line. Better recognition than being an Italian born. If you knew the right channels, you could possibly produce and sell altar wine.

Mosher: So during Prohibition altar wine sales were high?

Vercelli: It could have been the Italian Swiss, but I could never find any records of specific sales being made here in Sonoma County, I think they could have bought altar wine and packaged it, and I know they did that after Prohibition. I know they bought altar wine from Cribari and they put it up in gallon containers, but the sale of that was very small. I don't know of any producers of altar wine in Sonoma County during Prohibition. The major producers of altar wine were Concannon in Livermore and Beaulieu did well. Of course, the Christian Brothers who were at Martinez at that time, they produced their own altar wine.

Mosher: I would think so.

Vercelli: But beyond that...Oh! Los Gatos. The Novitiate at Los Gatos, the Jesuits at Los Gatos produced altar wine. But up here we didn't have any stills, we would find it difficult, leave alone getting the approval of the Archbishop. Brandy wasn't readily available to us up here.

Mosher: Well, all the producers of altar wine had to have gotten their brandy someplace.

Vercelli: Yes, they had to have a distillery on the premises or a relationship with a distiller.

Mosher: I wonder if they got special dispensation to bring it in from Canada or some such place.

Vercelli: I don't think so because I think the labeling laws would have had to indicate that. And I don't know that Canada made any brandy, because they didn't have very many grapes in Canada, or what they had was of the Labrusca variety, which doesn't lend itself because of the flavors and nuances of that variety would come over in the distillate.



Mosher: Right.

Vercelli: Incidentally, unless I forget, getting back to this Prohibition problem, there were three people going to be interviewed and one is Louis Foppiano and Millie Howie is going to interview him. I think that if she stresses, just as you have stressed, he was here, he was part of the act. He was two years older than I and that is very important, the difference between 12 and 14 makes a great deal of difference and that would bring us back to 1924, 1925, 1926. His family experienced the effect of the Volstead Act.

Mosher: Well, we seem to have lost a little bit here on the mood of the times during Prohibition. You commented that wine was common. If you went to an Italian's home during this period of time, there was wine there.

Vercelli: Yes, always. There was never a shortage of wine.

Mosher: And this was homemade wine.

Vercelli: There was never a shortage of homemade wine. As you said, some of it could have been made legally, and some of it by applying for a permit, and others could have been made illegally. I assume that more was made illegally than legally because every now and then you would hear of Prohibes, as we would call them, that would visit some place and chop a wine barrel and let the wine go down the sewer or something of that nature.

Mosher: To send a message out.

Vercelli: Yes.

Mosher: What percentage of wine during Prohibition, home wine that you would encounter, was red and what percentage of it was white.

Vercelli: I would say 98% red, 2% white. White was a rarity in home winemaking. A real rarity.

Mosher: Now I'm going to guess, that with all I've heard over the years about people's feelings about preference for wine, that if during this time most of the wine was red, probably it was the Mediterranean peoples, the Italians, the French and the Spaniards, and so on, that drank the wine because it was red and that the rest of the people almost from coast to coast didn't get too excited about most of the wines because they



were dry red. There's a high percentage of people who just don't like dry red. They like sweetness in their drinks. So they never really did get rolling insofar as being wine appreciators.

Vercelli: That's very true, that's why when Repeal came about, we didn't have a ready market, the market was ripe for dessert wines, but we in the industry, particularly in the North Coast, Sonoma & Napa counties didn't have any dessert wines to speak of. So consequently, when Repeal came about, the consuming public found the dessert wines much more appealing to them than the table wines. So dessert wines were well received but not the table wines, and of course the table wines that we made in those days, by today's standards were very inferior.

Mosher: If you went to the store to buy a bottle of legal red wine, what size bottle did it come in?

Vercelli: Right after the Repeal of Prohibition, you could sell wine in California in barrels. You sold wines to liquor stores in barrels, barrels or half barrels. So you would bring your own jug to the store and they would have a spigot in the barrel and fill the container.

Mosher: Who kept the barrel topped up or who put the nitrogen or the inert gases at the top?

Vercelli: Very few people used inert gas, they came in use a little later on—carbon dioxide and nitrogen. Nitrogen came in real late, the use of nitrogen, even industrial and commercially in the winery, didn't come in until perhaps the 50's.

Mosher: So people were buying somewhat oxidized wine depending on when they got their portion of that barrel.

Vercelli: Yes. And in many instances they would have a little bit of acetic acid in it by the time they got their wine, it depended upon the knowledge of the store keeper to keep the wine sound.

Mosher: —if they got the end of it.

Vercelli: —the length of time that the barrel or half barrel had been there. There was usually a distinction in price between the two. When you sold the half barrel, you got maybe two or three cents a gallon more than when you sold it in a barrel. The larger the container, the lower the price. Let's say if the market was 25 cents a gallon in a barrel, maybe you got 27





cents in a half barrel. Some people wanted the half barrels because their turnover wasn't so great and some people even bought wine in 10-15 gallon kegs because they didn't have great turnover.

Mosher: So when the merchant would buy the barrel or the half barrel, he could count on selling it off to people who would bring in their own bottles over what—a few days or a few weeks?

Vercelli: Well, the period of time that it would take [to empty the barrel] I don't recall whether it would be a week or ten days. But in some instances it was a 50 gallon barrel.

Mosher: It took some time.

Vercelli: Yes, it would take some time.

Mosher: I could see people going in for a sip and saying, "Oh, this is wonderful, fill it up" or taking a sip and saying, "Awk this is over the hill, let's try somebody else's wine."

Vercelli: That's just what took place.

Then, of course, we used barrels up until, I would think in the mid'1940's wholesalers would do some bottling, and even today a wholesaler can still bottle it, which you have Pelligrini in San Francisco that has tanks, I don't know if he still has a bottling line, but at one time he bottled. There is no restriction in selling a wholesaler, today, bulk wines, and they can put it in packages.

The fifth container gained some popularity during the war. But it didn't become popular until, oh, I would say, the late 50's or early 60's.

Mosher: There were screw tops too, weren't there?

Vercelli: Yes. During the War years, and we're talking about the effect of those regulatory agencies, for a period of time we had what we called the *Victory Bottle*. It was one bottle and only one bottle. We didn't have the different molded bottles, such as a Burgundy bottle or a Claret bottle or a Rhine bottle. This was flint glass and it was screw finished and everyone in the industry used that. Some of the wineries that had been using corks, Beaulieu, Wentz in particular, they would put a cork and then the screw cap over the cork. Then in some instances they would have a capsule. Lead capsules were out, you had the introduction of plastics at that time.



- Mosher: Because of the metal shortage in the War effort.
- Vercelli: Yes. Of course, most of the capsules were made abroad in Europe. There were very few capsules produced in America. Most of the lead and alumimun capsules were produced in Holland.
- Mosher: I'm also curious about the type of wood that was used. When you talked about barrels and half barrels, was this American Oak, were these brandy barrels and whiskey barrels, or was it exotic French Oak?
- Vercelli: Primarily, it was all American Oak, primarily new barrels that they would buy which were relatively inexpensive at that time, or they were whiskey barrels. I can recall, buying when I was with Scatena Brothers, buying a barrel knocked down in Ohio for 25 cents per barrel. Then you paid the freight out here, then you paid to recoup it. We at Scatena Brothers had Harry Belli, Harry was our cooper.
- Mosher: He would assemble it.
- Vercelli: And he would assemble the barrels. The barrels would come all tied up, the staves had been tied up with the tops and the bottoms.
- Mosher: Were they numbered?
- Vercelli: Not primarily numbered, but they would come tied up. You'd have a bundle of staves, you'd have tops and bottoms. But the staves themselves weren't numbered. Then you would reassemble them.
- Mosher: Then soak them, swell them up.
- Vercelli: Yes, you'd soak them, swell them up. You usually soaked them in an alkaline solution because in many instances, the product that was in the barrel would come through, if it was Bourbon, you'd taste Bourbon flavor. With Scotch it was horrible. Today occasionally you'll get a wine connoisseur saying, "Oh, that tastes medicinal." Well, we used barrels that stored Scotch, THEY WERE VERY MEDICINAL tasting to some people.
- Mosher: This is just an aside, but I remember when I worked at Sebastiani Winery about 20 years ago, freight cars would pull right into this winery and these barrels would come out from brandy makers back in the Midwest. And we'd unload the



barrels and then when August [Sebastiani] wasn't paying much attention, we'd turn them upside down and put a glass under them and we could get a lot of brandy out of those things because the wood would then yield a lot of the brandy that was absorbed.

Vercelli: Very true.

It was very common practice, so much so that a cooper in San Francisco, DeBella, was caught doing that and he paid one of the highest fines that anyone paid to the Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms & Tobacco, this was about a decade or two ago.

So they would buy the barrels and they would get enough product, if you got most of the product out of the barrels or the product that was in the barrels was 100 proof, usually what was barreled down was anywhere from 100-110-115 and in some instances 125 proof. For two reasons, one you needed less barrels if you had a higher proof. When you came back and cut it 100 or to 80 which was the, yeah, 80 proof, then you used a lot less barrels. So your warehousing costs were less, the higher the spirit it proved the greater evaporation. 168 proof, which is the commercial brandy, distilled at 168, will have greater evaporation than the 125 proof brandy, so it had its disadvantages. But it was very common, we would buy the barrels, do just as you mentioned at Sebastiani, we would perhaps pay \$1.00-\$1.25 for an erected barrel and then the freight to California.

Mosher: You mentioned the name DeBella.

Vercelli: DeBella in San Francisco, he was second generation there. He would be our contemporary—at least my contemporary. I guess he'd be a little bit younger. he'd be in his late 60's, early 70's now. But he made a business of it. We don't know how much money he made. Even if he paid a large fine, it still might have been profitable because by then he did it for so many years and it got to be such a matter of fact thing, that maybe he bragged about it a little bit, so someone kind of turned him in.

Mosher: The reason I keep pursuing the question of Prohibition is because I find it utterly fascinating. I think that when you have a law that is generally ignored by a high percentage of the population it has the effect of creating a certain disrespect for the law. It seems that that's what we had going during the 13 years of Prohibition and there was so much disrespect for it, as I understand things, that people couldn't believe that it wasn't repealed much sooner than it was. And





I understand that a lot of grape growers kept their fruit in the ground thinking that this crazy, silly law would be repealed and it went on three years, and five years, and they thought surely it would be repealed now, and it wasn't. They finally gave up at 8 or ten years, tore it all out and put in prunes and put in apples and pears and various other things, hops. And at the 13 year mark when it finally was repealed, the grape industry had been pretty well decimated. The vast bulk of the vineyard lands had been left to go fallow or they'd been torn up and planted to new crops. And so the industry really had to start over, almost completely.

Vercelli:

In 1920, or thereabouts, you had 220 wineries in the County of Sonoma at Prohibition, time. At Repeal of Prohibition, you had about 60, more or less, and that dropped down to about 25 and then it gradually decreased further. I don't recall when the number of wineries started to increase. But right after Repeal, you had a flurry of a lot of wineries that had existed prior to Prohibition open up. For example, here in Healdsburg, you had the Sodinis. They lasted for a year. You had Batista Pedroncelli which was the brother of John Pedroncelli. I don't remember his first name, you had the Bacchis, you had the Finlaysons. The Finlaysons opened up by Botch Foppiano, which was Louis Foppiano's uncle, they lasted about a year or two year, they didn't last very long.

So consequently, the number of wineries went down right after Prohibition was repealed. And then they were financed by Co-ops. The government, through the Federal Land Bank, financed a great many cooperative wineries, particularly down in the Valley. The only Co-op we had in Sonoma County was the Sonoma County Co-op. And that was formed in 1934, the bulk of those growers came from Dry Creek Valley because there was no one to take that grape. I remember [Carl] Petersen and Armand Casazza were instrumental in establishing the Sonoma County Co-op. But down in the Sacramento Valley, the Sacramento Valley and San Joaquin Valley Co-ops were very high in number. They out-numbered private entrepreneurs by far. And then in recent times they kind of disappeared like Eleven [Cellars], no longer exists, Food Industries were the market Co-ops, they went out of business.

Mosher:

So the Co-ops were there as a matter of necessity, to pool things in order to make a go of it.

Vercelli:

Yes. We had legislatures that championed our cause in the grape industry. We had Congressman Kahn, Julius Kahn, who represented us. When he passed away, his wife



succeeded him, Florence Kahn, she was a proponent of assistance for what few wineries we had and the grape growers.

Mosher: Now, it also seems to me that we had a system, an industry that was more delineated. You had the growers and that's what they did, they grew. They sold to the Co-ops or individuals and they bottled, or they put it in barrels. And then they sold it to others who marketed it. But you didn't find all of this under one roof—the grower, the fermentor, the bottler, and the sales team. They all kind of did a part of it and this is why Co-ops were so necessary, because you just didn't find the names that made wine here, that also bottled it and marketed it. Those parts of the thing were done by others. Is that pretty much true?

Vercelli: Yes, that's very true. You had the grower that produced the grapes and then they sold to a winery and the winery either had a marketing organization in place or they had affiliation with a non-producer. Food Industries didn't produce the wine, but they were the marketing organization. Today, the Guild produces and markets, but you had the marketing entity which was separate from the producing entity.

Mosher: Why is there just Zinfandel left? When you talk about these old vines in the Dry Creek area, they talk about pre-Prohibition Zinfandel. Why isn't there Alicante, Carignane, Cabernet, other grapes? Why is it always old Zinfandel, but never old anything else?

Vercelli: Well, now, the Alicante didn't last very long because it was an inferior wine. And other than one producer, Papagni, he was the one producer (and another of modern times is Mike Topolos of Russian River Vineyards in Forestville) that I'm aware of that ever marketed an Alicante Bouschet as such, but the wine didn't have any nuances that appealed to anyone. It had a *lot of color*. During Prohibition it was desirable because, as I previously stated, as far as the family home winemaker who purchased that grape, he would have his free-run wine, then he'd have the brown sugar and water there, a turn of wine would produce approximately 350-400 gallons of wine, product, let's say, not wine but a product. The second batch, let's say, which was lighter in color and lower in alcohol, it had to be consumed very early and you'd start drinking that. Incidentally, as you probably know, young wine has a laxative effect on human beings. You drink a lot of fresh wine, fresh grape juice, you have problems, whereas when you take that other wine that doesn't have that as the second rate wine, produced from the sugar and the mark of



the grape, you drink that a week or so later and you drink it being it was much lower in alcohol, if you didn't drink it prior to the advent of the following summer, it would turn to vinegar. And that this is what I mentioned my mother made in San Francisco, it was what we called *Pichetta*, that would be equivalent to our coolers.

Mosher: Did this wine find its way into barrels and into shops and was sold to people?

Vercelli: I beg your pardon?

Mosher: Was that wine sold?

Vercelli: No, no. That was home winemaking. That would never last, it would have been vinegar.

Mosher: When was the law written that prohibited chapetalization?

Vercelli: Gee, I don't know, because its prohibited in California. You can chapetalize in most other states. I don't know what the law is in Texas today whether they can chapetalize or not. But California can't by law.

Mosher: Not if it comes from California.

Vercelli: No, no. You can't even call it American.

Mosher: Someone did that, though. I've seen a California wine that has an American Appellation.

Vercelli: Yes, you saw it last year and saw Fetzer do it, and I don't know more about that. Because he bought grapes from Yakama Valley in Washington state two years when Chardonnay was hard to get and the market jumped really up in price and he couldn't fill his need, that's when the fighting varietals were being introduced and astounded everyone that they were so well received at \$5.00 a bottle that he ran out and rather than lose the marketplace, he went up and bought Yakama Valley grapes and had them crushed up there, brought the juice down and he marketed it and put on an American label, American wine.

Mosher: Would you say that the California law prohibiting chapetalization is primarily to protect the grower or was it a consumer quality concern?

Vercelli: I think it was primarily a consumer quality. We get optimum maturity, in fact, as we discussed at our first meeting, that





grapes up until recent time were based—prices were based—on sugar content. The higher the sugar, the higher the bonus factor for the grape. And of course, that effected quality. Whereas today, if your grapes are excessively sweet, you are penalized.

Mosher: Your acids are low.

Vercelli: That's right.

Mosher: Well, I suspect that's true too. But also I know that if you're a grower, you wouldn't want any avenue open whereby a winery that does a bulk wine in particular, could put the sugar and hold the hose in there a little longer and kind of stretch it. Now what do you get—175-180-185 gallons with the new techniques?

Vercelli: Depends upon the grape, depends upon your facilities, your presses and the like. It depends on your vinification practices, whether you use enzymes to break down the cell structure of the grape and give you more free juice. But I would say that the average yield of salable wine which would include your press, would be not less than 165 gallons. I had explained to you in our first meeting about Petri's system of evaluating winemakers. So most of these winemakers today would find it difficult working on that basis because they worked for individuals where they figured press wine has no value, that they get 140 gallons to the ton or 135 gallons to the ton. That makes little difference to them. I think that the fluidity of the industry today is such that your prime interest is quality. And you can't do it with certain types of equipment and certain practices.

Davis: Bulk was called, the other name for it was Barberone?

Vercelli: Barberone. The suffix "one" means big. And they would make the wine because they had Alicante grape that has colored juice. It's one of the few grapes that has colored juice and so consequently, they would use that and it makes a very tannic wine. The Alicante grape per se is stemmy. It's not a compact bunch. I never saw any statistics on it and it would be interesting to do so. To find out the relationship of stem to the relationship of fruit of grapes that give you by weight that make the wine. Now, Alicante would not give you a great yield because the weight of the stems could be 10-15-20% more than those which would produce colorless juice. And yet it would produce a bitterness because of the relationship of the fruit of the grape berry itself could camouflage the wood, because of its stringy nature.



Alicante is not a compact bunch like the Zinfandel or the Petite Sirah or the Cabernet, and that's why it shipped well, being that it was an open grape they shipped well. It was difficult to get refrigerated cars, shipping was important. When I was a kid in San Francisco, we would go down to South City, South San Francisco, where they had a side track. The railroad had side tracks where they kept the cars. The refrigerated cars had ice bunkers at either end of the car, well, in the months of August, September, and early October, you had competition for that. You still had peaches, you still had other foods, you had apples and they would perhaps have a higher priority for the use of ice to refrigerate the cars. So consequently, the Alicante would stand shipping—the Zinfandel wouldn't. When the Alicante hit the auction market, it would maybe have ten days of longevity. When the Zinfandel hit the auction market, it might have five or seven days of longevity depending upon the temperature in that car and the humidity in that car. If you had a high temperature and a humid condition, then mold growth would be just like that (snaps) and once it started to mold—it molded very, very rapidly. Whereas, the Alicante, being that it had that open bunch and that the skin of the Alicante grape is tough, would ship and last better. Next time you get a bunch of Alicante from someone who still grows it, if you get a sample of it, you bite in, you'll see that the skin is firm, even though it's high in sugar, it'd be raisins, but it'd still be firm. But that isn't true of the Zinfandel.

Davis: We're talking about what period of time when wines were shipped in bulk?

Vercelli: Oh, anywhere from 1933 on. Very few people use barrels today, but you can still find some people who buy by the barrel, but you don't find very many bottlers left. Bottlers back East are more or less going out of business. I don't know of any bottler today that exists and buys wine in barrels. But I would say up until the mid-60's and 70's it was common practice.

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Vercelli: I'd like to quote Frank Nervo in what he told me of some of his experiences during Prohibition. He said that they would take a half barrel of wine and nail it beneath the bung hole, so when the sample was taken it was taken of the wine, and the remainder of the tank was filled rocks or gravel, thence with water. So when you hit the side of the tank, you could hear that it was full. But when you had this container nailed



to the top of the tank and the bung hole in the center so when you took your sample it just went down into the wine. In those days I don't think they measured the contents. Today, if you take an inventory, you'd go to the bottom of the tank and you would measure the contents. But for the sake of taking a sample, you just take the sample from the bung hole with a thief.

Pete Esaia, Peter and his experiences. He had a large vineyard and prune orchard. His father, Al Esaia, frequented a cigar store in town, called Wolf's Cigar Store. A lot of business was transpired there. All of the old timers met there such as John Menalgia and Al Esaia...but all the information about prune prices, grape prices were conducted there. That was a meeting place, sort of a town hall deal. And so Al Esaia was more or less a leader in the community and his son Peter is still alive and Pete told me about the winery. I guess it was the French American Wine Company that was located on University Street right on the Russian River. That was the group that came in from Icaria. Remember we mentioned Icaria? I found their papers. So next time you come in, I'll show you their papers—

Mosher: Good, good.

Davis: Before, you were talking about some of the things you had heard about some of the underground winemaking during Prohibition. I think we missed some of that you were talking about. Do you recall any stories or did you personally become aware of any underground winemaking during Prohibition in Sonoma County?

Vercelli: No, not particularly. Now, when you say underground winemaking, other than the home winemaker that didn't apply for a permit. As far as wineries are concerned, you had wineries that stored wine for many years—I know the DeGeorge Winery held wines for a good many years, I told you about the experience of Simi what had the wine for 13 years, and then the difference between putrefaction and acidification and the problems that we had with the BATF. But I didn't hear of any clandestine operations in the area during Prohibition. Though I wasn't a native of here and these individuals that I'm talking about were natives.

Mosher: So they might have had a closer network amongst themselves that was more clandestine.

Vercelli: Yes.





- Davis: I think you said something about your own experience with the Scatena Winery.
- Vercelli: I went to work there in April 1936, I was winemaker for Scatena for 6 years. I was general manager and practically a jack of all trades. I started by making wine and [then] process it and then go out and sell it. Well, one day over a period of time, I uncovered a small barrel in the tank house and I found some brandy in it, and I realized they were bootlegging there. I was wondering why the proprietor would invariable go into this room. It wasn't a big operation, you wouldn't see many people come in very often. Once this happened, I immediately resigned, they didn't accept my resignation, but they never sold anymore. Dr. Scatena, who was part owner, had a lot to lose, the other two partners didn't—but he did.
- Not being a native, I don't know the stories. I did tell you about Emil Scoli who lived way out in the boondocks on a one lane road way up top of a hill. It was hard to find his home, his place, it was a very sheltered place.
- Mosher: So what he did up there was pretty much on his own.
- Vercelli: That's very true.
- Davis: And you were saying that he was arrested and prosecuted?
- Vercelli: Yes. He was arrested—I don't think he served a jail sentence, but he was fined.
- Mosher: About what year are you speaking of here?
- Vercelli: It could have been after Prohibition cause he worked for me in the 1940's, the late 40's. His activity occurred a year or two before. But it could have been after Prohibition. What he did during the Prohibition era I don't know.
- Mosher: Well, I'm fascinated by the whole Prohibition era. Now I have a much better understanding of the way things were at that time. Could you talk now about the evolution of the wine industry from the kind of disorganized, scattered efforts that took place shortly after the repeal, maybe through the 1950's and maybe into the early 60's when the industry was just getting back on its feet and trying to train people into putting wine at the table where the salt and pepper shakers [were], and so on, and so forth, and how the packaging, promotions and public relations had changed and just the whole ball of wax.



Vercelli:

Let's start by year. From 1933 to 1938 we had a period of rather extremely difficult times because of quality of product. No one had any financing. You came out of the Depression era, with little or no capital. You had no one that was trained to produce the product.

The industry was not aware of their market. The people in the North Coast and many operations in the southern part of the state assumed that the consuming public wanted table wines and very few of them had anticipated that the consumer wanted dessert wines. The industry had not been very well financed, there were no sources of financing other than the Bank of America and the Federal Land Bank.

As a result of not having stable financial sources of money, a good many cooperative wineries sprung up, particularly in the Lodi area. You had maybe six, seven, or eight wineries and a good many of them went by the boards and some consolidated to form the Guild Winery, which was an amalgamation of Co-ops in the Lodi area. Here in Sonoma County in the year 1934, the Sonoma County Cooperative Winery was formed in the town of Windsor. The reason for them forming was that there weren't sufficient wineries available in the community to acquire their grapes, and, of course, the lack of demand for table wine.

So in 1937 and 1938, the industry started to develop large inventories of wine. They couldn't sell their wines so consequently the price of grapes declined. I don't recall what the price of grapes were in 1933, but I do recall that in 1936, they were selling around \$22-\$23 a ton.

Then in 1938, because of the excess inventories that existed throughout the industry, you had the State Department of Agriculture enacting the Prorate Act to the California wine industry. You could not convert all the grape, all the grape that you wanted into wine. A portion of it could not go to market, it had to be converted to brandy. Being there were no stills in Sonoma County that could handle the conversion of grape into brandy, consequently, the program was not very well accepted by the growers in Sonoma or in the North Coast counties. They questioned the legality of the Prorate Act and took action and went to court. That was the year the government or the regulatory agencies first recognized Appellation of Origin. You had two individuals—who were very, very prominent, one by the name of Frank Nervo, who had a winery, and one of the most outstanding grape growers in Sonoma County, Dewey Baldocchi, hired the firm of DeMeo



& DeMeo to defend their actions as they challenged the validity of the Prorate Act.

The enforcement branch of the Department of Agriculture had an Armenian, whose name slips my mind, he tried to stop the delivery of grapes to the wineries. So the DeMeos—now this was a state law, but the federal government was involved in it because Nick DeMeo and Dewey Baldocchi went to Washington and addressed the Congress. In fact, you better call him, give Nick a call and ask him what he remembers of the Prorate. And he can really give you the story. They hired attorneys, from the firm of DeMeo & DeMeo to represent them because the State had cited them and was going to bring criminal charges against them for their violation of the terms of the Act. Consequently, the local farmers, the farmers in Sonoma County, as well as a few in Napa County, but primarily Sonoma County, took the leadership against the Act. As a result of this court action, the courts decided that the 11 counties of the North Coast would be exempt. North Coast counties were made up of 1) Sonoma, 2) Napa, 3) Mendocino, 4) Contra Costa, 5) Alameda, 6) San Mateo, 7) San Francisco (which grows no grape), 8) Lake, 9) Solano, 10) Santa Clara, & 11) Marin. This was the first time that you had a feeling or the beginning of identifying the appellation of origin of grapes.

But the remaining counties could not utilize all their grapes. So they converted a portion of the grapes crushed into brandy and the producer had the option of buying the brandy. The brandy had to be stored for two years in order to be sold as a commercial brandy.

Mosher: Now, why did the government have an interest in making brandy to the point they would dictate to growers that some of their crop had to go to this brandy production?

Vercelli: The Prorate Act was an Act passed by the State Legislature of California during a period of time when we had surpluses in many agricultural products. I believe there were something like 19 programs—Prorate programs—which included the grape program. That was in the year 1938 that grapes were affected. The Prorate program was one in which as the word indicates, they prorated the commodity that was being raised. In this case it was grapes. The Prorate program and the others could have been before and after, but I do recall at one time there were 19 different industries involved in a Prorate program.





The state government was the source of that [Act]. They figured that you were converting a perishable into a relative non-perishable that had greater longevity. That was the theory behind it. So when the War broke out and all these restrictions came upon us, those people that had brandy on hand had the right of first refusal to purchase it. I think the state financed the deal. In other words, you were paid to manufacture, you were paid to store, I don't recall because I didn't have any first hand experience with it, but you were also paid for the purchase of the barrels. So basically you had a free ride. When the War broke out in 1939 and then the restrictions came about. We entered the War in 1941 and overnight you were more or less out of business. These people had an opportunity of buying that brandy.

The fact that the State was divided into a number of viticultural areas that had no common bond was not taken into consideration by the Prorate Program. There are four segments of the grape industry. Grapes can go to the fresh fruit market, they can be dried, they can go into the winery, they can be distilled. The Thompson Seedless has four channels. During the War years, you could not use a table grape for winemaking. We found that great inequities existed in yields. Down in the Valley you could get extremely high yields, whereas up here in Sonoma County the yields were much lower. Let's take Zinfandel grapes for example. We got four plus tons in Sonoma County, but you could probably get as high as six or eight or ten tons to the acre in the Lodi area, or in the Fresno or Bakersfield area. As a result of these inequities, the North Coast grape growers sought to nullify or asked to be exempt from the provisions of the Prorate Act. So they brought court action.

Mosher: [No table grapes could be used in winemaking?] No Tokay, no Muscat?

Vercelli: No Tokay, no Muscat! That was fresh fruit. No Thompson Seedless. So at midnight, certain wineries were crushing grapes. You take Gino Bernardi. He had the Windsor Winery. Gino got grape, Gino had wine. I analyzed his product. And other wineries, these people are still living. I'm not going to mention them, but they would buy these grapes that came in from the Valley which were Thompson Seedless and—Thompson was the basis for setting wine prices or grape prices for many years. The price of raisins were high, the price of wine grapes were low. They were inter-related. The people down the Valley, had source the source of raw material. First they would take Thompson Seedless, packing house culls, which went into high proof brandy and



manufacture of dessert wines. So consequently, they would have a source of low priced grapes.

Mosher: It's still unclear to me as to why the Prorate law came into effect. It was a reaction to a surplus?

Vercelli: We had a surplus of grape. We couldn't sell our product. We had a surplus of grapes, we had a surplus of wine.

Mosher: Why did the government take such a proactive role in determining how you would handle your surplus?

Vercelli: Well, first you had the politicians and you had the growers down in the Valley, the market could not absorb all the grape. The inventories were going up. No one would finance the inventory. The one remaining source of financing was the Bank of America other than the Co-ops. And then all of a sudden, two years later, we go into a war and all the restrictions. One thing is surplus, the next thing a shortage, just like that—overnight. Then all these restrictions, what were we going to do, who's going to be around? And so consequently, you went from one extreme to the other. The bulk of the industry, and that was again exemplified two or three weeks ago when the Wine Commission was dissolved, the political strength and the economic strength of the industry up to recent times was in the dessert wine producing area. So consequently, they controlled the industry. As far as, economic value, until just recent times with the premium grapes, the value was down there.

The market change was so rapid and there was a need. Now, the prorate philosophy existed because we weren't able to market our products. There were many, about 19, marketing programs. You had a marketing program on figs, you had a marketing program on olives, on almonds, on prunes and peaches. The only ones that I was aware of that you didn't have one on was apricots. And so wherever you had a marketing program, you had the political aspect that came into the picture. The politicians in Sacramento, every time they could create a bureau, they would, just like today, you've seen that.

The Democratic philosophy of private entrepreneurs would get into problems, as we don't have a regulatory agency governing that. And that is exemplified by the Savings and Loan industry. So long as they were controlled by the government, they could only use their monies to build homes, hence they were successful. But the minute they were given a little latitude—that they could buy resorts in Arizona, they



could go into the insurance business, they could speculate—the Soderlings [contractors involved in Savings and Loan problems] here in Sonoma, that philosophy caused the industry to fall apart.

So consequently, the philosophy of trying to control, to artificially control supply and demand just didn't work. As a result, they permitted the people in the 11 northern counties to be out of the Prorate and they said, "*You have a geographical area, your cost of production is higher, you grow different types of grapes.*" This was as a direct result of the presentations that Nick and Charlie DeMeo made, and it came about in a very short period of time. Normally, these things go on and go to a committee or sub-committees.

This morning, read Gaye LeBaron's column in the *Press Democrat* about the Communists and the attitude in Sonoma County. That same attitude of rebellion that existed back in the days from 1932-35 or 36, 37, something like that, it's a very interesting article on Communism, but it's also the feeling of a people being suppressed. So we had these people, such as Frank Nervo, Dewey Baldocchi, Armand Casazza, these were the stalwarts that fought the Prorate. I don't think that the attorneys, the DeMeos, even made any money on it. I think they all put in a lot of time and effort.

An example of how the Prorate personally affected me, I wasn't in the position in 1938 to borrow much money and it was a common practice in the industry to share crop. This was a common practice and even Italian Swiss used it, you made wine on a share basis. By that I mean to say that the grapes were delivered to the winery and the first 100 gallons of wine were given to the grape grower and any overage over 100 gallons was retained by the winemaker for his services rendered. In essence that practice was illegal because the grower couldn't take title to the wine, he couldn't borrow money on it because the wine was made under the bond of the winery and consequently, they couldn't transfer the ownership of that wine to the grower. Although no one challenged this, this was the relationship established between the grower and the winery so that the grower would feel as though he were getting a fair shake in the deal. And the winery, of course, could continue operating on the surplus wine or the gallonage of wine over and above the first 100 gallons. We didn't have the processing equipment that we have today, so if we got 50 or 60 gallons to the ton, that is 60 gallons over the 100 or a total of 150 or 160 gallons, the members of the industry which practiced this procedure found it satisfactory.





Mosher: So you were getting 160 gallons from the ton, roughly.

Vercelli: That is rough.

Mosher: As compared to today, you get what? More like 175 or 180 gallons.

Vercelli: Yes, easily. And on the white you may do even a little bit better.

Mosher: The new presses are so efficient.

Vercelli: They are so efficient today, yes, that's very true.

The first 100 gallons went to the grower and the remainder was for your services. Sometimes the grower didn't have or couldn't find a market or found it difficult or needed maybe a \$10 advance or something or \$4 picking advance, \$4 a ton to pick the grapes, not \$104 but \$4. Okay, so then you advance him that. But you only gave him 90 gallons of wine, then you retain the extra 10 gallons that you figure is worth \$4 or something like that.

So I made wine for Gauntlet, a small quantity of wine. Gauntlet was a very wealthy man. So he hounded me. But in 1939 the Frei Brothers, Louie and Walter, sold their inventory to Gallo for 7 cents a gallon. And if you figure, get a calculator, you divide 170 into \$12, what do you come up with?

Mosher: You get 7 cents, it looks like.

Vercelli: Okay, 7 cents a gallon. So he didn't recover cost. At this time I also had wine, I couldn't sell it. But I wasn't going to sell it at 7 cents a gallon. I didn't think of selling wine for 7 cents! So Gauntlet hounded me. I don't know how we finally disposed of the wine. We bottled it after a year, we held on to it for a period of time, it was a very distasteful experience. A good many of us had the same problem.

It was good for the grower to find a home. A grower was fine, he was peaches and cream, he was going to do this, he was going to do that. But when you converted the perishable into a relatively non-perishable for a period of time, then his attitude changed. Changed like the weather. Typically there were very few exceptions.

Mosher: So he was delighted you'd take his fruit.



- Vercelli: At that time, yeah. Then he was going to buy tanks to store the wine...
- Mosher: He's your buddy at the time, but later on he's not your buddy because—
- Vercelli: He's not going to buy tanks, he's not going to do this. It now becomes, when's he going to get his money? And he didn't know the market, he didn't understand the marketing. And most of the growers didn't.
- Davis: Under that arrangement, Joe, then you said the first quantity of wine would be your obligation to the grower. Did they expect to be paid really from when you sold that quantity, you would pay them in cash, essentially?
- Vercelli: Yes, he would expect it. But you had your wine to sell equally — the excess, so you stayed in business. Then your element of profit as indicated there was nil. You had no element of profit. So if he would get market return of \$12 he was lucky, selling at 7 cents a gallon. This was the situation, we don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for the outbreak of the War. When you read that article about the price of argols and the price of high proof at that period of time. It kind of enlightens you a little bit concerning what conditions existed. I'm glad that we are getting this down because when I go, forgive me for saying it again, there're very few people of the industry left. Someone has been writing about it someplace, but it was never in an archive like a library.

So let's get back to time. We're up to 1939. Then with the outbreak of the War from about 1940-45 irrespective of the regulatory agencies and their philosophy, we survived and made a few dollars. Then in 1946 when the War came to an end, and you saw the "writing on the wall," we started to build up inventories again.

Because of the makings of the industry, you had the four channels for grapes. We didn't have the varieties, we didn't have the astuteness we have today, in that raisin and table grapes were utilized to make wine. Today very little of those varieties go into winemaking. Then it would go into brandy, but very little Tokay goes into wine making today. The brandy market had never truly increased, it's more or less stagnate. The consumption of brandy has been relatively moderate, it hasn't been high and it hasn't increased. The



share of the market has increased among the industry members, but the consumption it's relatively low.

During this time, the Co-ops started to disappear. There were very few. So basically, that brings you up to about the 50's. And then in the 50's, you had the threat of the Korean Conflict. So what did we do? We all started to hog. We went through just 15 years before that period of time, went through a war, were faced with another one and so what are going to do? We started to gear up immediately. Everybody started to tighten up their belts, we started to hoard inventory, tried to find out which way to go, how to survive. Then of course the Korean Conflict didn't escalate into a major conflict.

Then in 1955, the Eisenhower Administration modified the Internal Revenue Code whereby you could produce a alcoholic beverage without paying a Rectifying Tax. You could add sugar to it and pure natural fruit flavoring without paying a rectifying tax of 30 cents a gallon. So people that saw and studied the law, which was primarily Gallo, realized that there was a change, they realized that the greatest consumption was of dessert wines. So they came out with a product called Thunderbird. Thunderbird was 20% alcohol, it was colorless, it was acidulated. Meanwhile Italian Swiss had no research, no one in their organization that was well enough versed to technically prepare a similar product, so they got a chemist out of Wisconsin. The president then was Solari, where he got the chemist I don't know. But he came in and he took out certain constituents, terpenes as they called them and they created Silver Satin. That was after Gallo had saturated the market. But in the meantime, that gave the marketers an opportunity to realize that the American public wanted something that was alcoholic, was sweet and tasted like 7-UP. And from that you got into the production of the other products, Annie Green Springs, for example, and they were big volume items. We had a product, Golden Spur, (a nasty thing,) it was a sort of cola base, I can't name them all.

Mosher: Tyrolia? That was a wine.

Vercelli: Tyrolia was a sweet wine of low alcohol, oh there were so many. But all were basically flavored with pure fruit concentrate or pure fruit extracts. So it said on the label "Pure fruit flavored" or "made from natural pure fruit products." That was the turning point in the industry.

Mosher: Was some of that fruit apple?





Vercelli: Oh yes, apple and pear were the basis—this is interesting. When the pricing structure of grapes started to improve, the Gallos went out and they bought all the apple concentrate on the face of the earth—Europe, South American. Then they got pears and converted pears and they'd say it was made from pear wine. And that strengthened the market for pears. It also strengthened the market for apples. And as a result of not having any more demand—these types of wines having decreased in sales, they don't produce them any more, that's why you're having trouble in Sebastopol with all the culls. Previously, the fruit that was on the ground, would be picked up and converted into alcohol, which they used in all wine of this type. They clarified it and flavored it and it was accepted.

Mosher: Then came Ripple and Boones Farm.

Vercelli: Then came Ripple. They were big sellers. Boones Farm, Ripple and the like, I can't name them all. But those were the of wines that were popular. Also, Sangria, in fact, I have a bottle or two of Sangria around, and Bali Hai. I have a bottle of Bali Hai Champagne in the back room.

Davis: Joe, are you saying that all of that started with a tax change?

Vercelli: Yes. It all started with a tax change in 1955-56 under the Eisenhower Administration.

Mosher: And it was only Gallo that caught that?

Vercelli: Gallo was the first one. The only one that was prepared and [got] a six months start on the entire industry. The next one was Italian Swiss to come along. But by then, Gallo was already in the marketplace.

Mosher: They owned the market.

Vercelli: Yes, Gallo owned the market in this catagory or style of wines. In fact with the Thunderbird leverage, Gallo was able to open other marketing doors for other wine lines and products. Gallo prior to Thunderbird was not a significant brand in the New York Metropolitan market. That market was shared primarily by Italian Swiss Colony's Fior di California, Guild's Vino di Tavola, Petri's Vino Pastoso, Mondavi's CK and local bottlers. Carlo Rossi and Hearty Burgundy had not been introduced at that time. Thunderbird changed all that. Incidentally these types of fruit flavored wines could not by law be labelled California Wine. Following Thunderbird a marked change took place from high alcohol



products to low alcohol fruit flavored products and hence to wine coolers which were of low alcohol content and slightly carbonated. I say slightly because if they exceeded a given quantity of carbon dioxide they would be subject to a \$2.00 per gallon carbonated wine tax.

Davis: Could you focus a little more on that tax change. Did Gallo have anything to do with the tax change?

Vercelli: No, no. That was the Eisenhower Administration, I don't know how that came about, or how the lobbyists were encouraged. I think maybe our legislatures were involved, I'm not aware of Gallo having anything to do with it. You know, the Gallos changed a law in Congress on income tax. You can pass a piece of property onto a grandchild, I don't know what you call the law.

Mosher: Generation skipping tax.

Vercelli: Gallo sponsored that. Gallo got that through. Their political power cannot be underestimated. They did it. And it was primarily the Gallo family. I'm not aware of other prominent families, such as the Fords, the Rockerfellers or others that accomplished such a feat.

Davis: That's a later tax.

Vercelli: Yes, that was later.

Davis: But as far as this tax change that created Thunderbird?

Vercelli: If you altered the product, you changed a product or used something other than pure grape juice to make wine, you had to pay what was called a Rectifying Tax at 30¢ per gallon. For example, if I wanted to make a Retsina wine which is the use of pine pitch in white wine, it was taxable. I told you the story of having had a Greek customer [Mr. Andrews] in San Francisco. I'd deliver him five barrels of white wine and I'd bring him a can of pitch so he could add it. With the passing of this law in 1955-56, you could sell your ameliorated product and you would not pay that tax. Basically, the tax was quite a percentage of the total cost of the product at 30¢ a gallon.

Davis: Was the tax being paid before this tax change, was it being paid on all wine, the Rectifying Tax?

Vercelli: No, only being paid on wines that you rectified or ameliorated, that you added a foreign product to. For



example, the Retsinas, the Retsinas are not a natural constituent of the grape. If I wanted to add a bitter, like in Italy you have Campari, there's an excellent example.

Mosher: Or Dubonnet.

Vercelli: Yes, all right. If you wanted to add a foreign substance, then you've rectified the product and a rectifier could do it, a rectifier having a special license to do it. Then you get a lot of the coolers that are made by rectifiers, they add extracts to them. So they would pay a Rectification Tax.

Davis: Okay, I think I have it. What happened is that whereas before a tax would have had to have been paid by Gallo making the Thunderbird, they wouldn't have to pay it any more.

Vercelli: That's correct.

Davis: They saw an opportunity to take wine and rectify it and produce a less expensive product?

Mosher: Ameliorate it.

Vercelli: Ameliorate it, that's correct. And get rid of some wine, [create a] new product, get rid of some wine and create a new market.

Davis: Whereas, before it would have been much more expensive for them to do this.

Vercelli: Yes, that's correct. And as I said, the cost, the 30¢ cost, perhaps eliminated that product from the marketplace, because it represented as much as 50% of the cost. So instead of paying 1 cent a gallon, it cost 30 cents a gallon, or in the case of dessert wine, 2 cents state tax, 67 cents federal tax and another 30 cents that made it 98 cents.

Mosher: Just took the profit right out of it.

Mosher: So, this new law made it profitable and possible.

Vercelli: Yes, made it possible and profitable.

Davis: How did Gallo know that this would be a popular beverage?

Vercelli: Oh, I don't know. That was an element of risk. If they made market surveys, I don't know. All I can say is they've been tremendously successful. They did what no one else in the





alcoholic beverage field of any kind did, they have accumulated great wealth. None of the Seagrams family, you go right down the line, in one generation, a private company, not, a single company, only the Gallos. And they're still privately owned. They don't have any stock that I'm aware of. Only God knows what their worth is. So that all happened as a result of the reduction in the Rectifying Tax. It's good to have a legal mind, a barrister around to kind of pick your brains on something like that.

Davis: I would like to hear about public relations, too, throughout this whole time. Not just what you did, but what the industry was doing. Who was doing it well and who wasn't doing it at all.

Vercelli: Let's see if I can take you up in time, we're getting to the 60's. Then in the early part of the 60's, you started to get the Napa Valley people and others that started to grow in abundance varietal grapes, primarily the reds, Cabernet and Pinot. Then shortly thereafter, the whites. In 1967, I think, table wines exceeded the sales of dessert wines. And from thereon up, it had tremendous plantings.

You had the influx of capital during that period of time. Massachusetts Mutual came into the picture, that made Andy Beckstoffer. You had the Beringers that came in the late 1950's, Nestles came in, Heublein came in, you got Wells Fargo to put a couple of bucks on the table, Rodney Strong came into the picture—he went public, he sold stock, borrowed a million dollars from the some bank in Atlanta, Georgia and never paid it. He started to buy all this land at inflated prices, buying prune land at \$3,000 an acre and he owned 5,000 acres of land at one time, he owned it in name. And today it's decreased and so he's lost most of his holdings.

You had this tremendous influx of capital which stimulated interest. Then you had, what do you call them, Yuppies? With the aftermath of the Second World War, you had an entirely different philosophy in the 60's, you had Mario Savio, you had different thinking. If I were told in 1960 that I would see a bottle of \$18 wine, I'd have said "You're Crazy!"

Mosher: \$18 a bargain!

Vercelli: Now \$50 a bottle for Opus, I'd say "We'll put you in a straight jacket." Who was prepared for it? The greatest marketer of alcoholic beverages up until recent times has been Heublein. Look at the success of Smirnoff Vodka, they had research people, they had this, they had that. Look at the mistakes



they made. Today they own a lot, but look at the damage they did. Coca-Cola, lasted three years in the wine industry. Three years. How much did they lose? Only God knows—even the stockholders didn't know how much they lost. I never saw it in print, where someone analyzed it.

This all took place in the early 70's. Let's go back once more as a result of that change. When Ripple comes into the market, and they sold what 10, 12 million cases, where do they sell it? College campuses. Who was your buyer? Your buyer was the Yuppie, the child that was born after the Second World War. He comes in the back door and buys Ripple, he likes it, he gets to know what a wine is like, and then when we get a little further on in the early 70's, we start planting these varietal grapes, then the transition is made. They go from Ripple and they don't mind paying \$10 or \$12 for a bottle of Cabernet.

So consequently, that brings us up to the early part of the 70's, you had all these limited partnerships. I used to keep track of them, I used to have a file on them. They started to go out to a guy over in Oakville. Van Lobensels, that was the only one in the North Coast, but down in the [San Joaquin] Valley, you had many limited partnerships. They sprang up like mushrooms and they all went by the board. Then you had Tenneco, Getty Oil buying 3,000 acres of land, oil people buying 3,000 acres of land. He makes a deal with Franzia, with one of the Franzia people. Today, Chevron Oil is in the wine business up here. Look at the impact it has made on society and the people that have come in. And that is during the 80's, look at the different segment that came in the 80's. And then the growth of all the professional people entering the industry. I met Jean Jacques Michel yesterday, I went to Domaine Michel in Dry Creek. We had a private tour. Annie, my daughter, read an article in the newspaper, that said they were open to the public if you telephoned by appointment. So we telephoned and we were the only people that went on the tour. We spent two hours, they treated us royally and met Michel himself. Also, look at the Jordans [Tom & Sally].

The stability of the industry today is much greater than at any time in its history. When you get Nestle, that can wait 5, 8, 10 years for its profit. In the meantime, you get Jordan to hold his wines, Cabernets, for four years so it can really be a delightful product, you're going to have an ambiance, sure it costs money to hold for that time. That brings us up to date.

Mosher:

I don't want you to lose your train of thought here, but this is something that has been on my mind and I've never asked it.



I've always wanted to ask it of a person whose been in the business a long time, as you have. It never made real good sense to me that red wines and white wines sold at about the same amount of money. It always seemed to me because you get your money back on the white wine within a matter of months or maybe a year and a half at the most for a reserved Chardonnay, that it should sell for a lot less than a red wine. So what I concluded, and I've told people this for years, because I can't think of any other explanation, and that is simply that the red wine should sell for a lot more than the white, but so that they'll sell at pretty close to equal amounts, the white wines cost a little more than they should so that the red wines can cost a little less than they should so that they can sell at parity. And so if you're a red wine lover, the white wine lovers are actually making your product a little bit less expensive because that's the way it is. Otherwise whites would be really cheap and reds would be so expensive who'd buy them?

Vercelli:

That's very true. Very true. And if you take certain wineries, let's take Alderbrook, for example, they make only white wines. So as a result, they can make a lot more profit because they don't hold their wines that long. They can undersell. So if a Sauvignon Blanc gives you X dollars and cents return at their prices, they get a lot more because they don't have that carrying charge for turnover, and they can be smaller. The minute that you get to a given size and you start going into red wines, then you're not going to get a return for two years, three years, and in some instances, four years. Now with the inventories building up in red wines, we're getting better wines, you're getting much better wines. Of course, you might figure they're costing more, but I think that most of those people can well afford to wait because they're pretty well financed.

You also have another trend today, private labels. If you look at the *Press Democrat*, every week Chevron has a new DBA. Every week you can name one, two, or three, so they have a program where they're bottling wines for growers. The grower has maybe a 100 ton of grape and he has 50 tons of grape converted into wine. Then Allan Hemphill, who's the manager at Gauer Estates, Vinwood Cellars, he makes a profit on that wine, he makes a profit in carrying charges 3 to 5 cents per gallon per month, then he gets a bottling charge so he's making profit all the way along the line.

Mosher:

He gets the warehouse too, doesn't he?





Vercelli: He gets the warehouse fees, he gets an in-fee and an out-fee. And the ego of that grape grower is so that, "It's my wine, good, bad, or indifferent, it's my wine." And he sells maybe 200 cases here, he sells 100 cases there, and there has to be a market for that. Of course, Vinwood Cellars does it every week, I'll venture to say that they have over 100 DBA's, a minimum of 100.

Mosher: This is the perfect time for me to ask a question. I'll give a little background first. Some years ago I worked in the retail trade down in Sausalito, like about 18 years ago. Gallo had a huge share of the market with their Andre sparkling wine. And just about the time I was there and had done my entry level work into the retail business, I noticed the Gallo people who came in and they wanted to buy some shelves and wanted to own a piece of the store. Well, they also introduced something called Gallo Champagne and it was \$2.49 and the Andre was \$1.99. The public continued to buy the Andre like crazy, even if they increased to price to \$2.49 or \$2.69, the Andre would still sell, but I found that nobody wanted the high life image of Champagne with the name Gallo on it. Even if it was a better product, they didn't want champagne with the name Gallo on it because that's associated with the lower end of the market in the jug business.

Now, I see Gallo trying again to come out with a premium product with the name Gallo on it. And you talked about ego. I think, I don't know if it's Ernest or Julio, or both of them together, but it seems like there must be a lot of ego there because they're now trying to take over the premium end of the market with their Frei Brothers operation and their premium. They're launching these massive ad campaigns and the product says Gallo. My experience with their champagne attempt is that the public is not going to buy premium wine at \$8, \$10, \$12, \$14 with the name Gallo on it. There are too many others out there that are good, that they are already accustomed to. They'll let Gallo have the jug market, but they won't let Gallo in on the premium end with the name Gallo on it. Now, they might do a DBA, do a market thing and figure out a better name and the public might buy it then, but I don't think they're going to buy it with Gallo on it. What do you think?

Vercelli: I concur with you. It's proven their Ballatore, the sparkling wine with the Italian name. The only identification of Gallo on that is Modesto, CA, beyond that you can't tell. And look at the spread. It doesn't cost them a damn penny more than the Andre, at \$1.99, and Ballatore has been as stable as the rising and the setting of the sun at \$5.00. It's been in every



market and it's been a relatively accepted product. But the other, as far as predicting what's going to happen to that philosophy of the people not accepting the Gallo name is just difficult for me. I'm not that much of a marketer or have that expertise.

Mosher: My gut says they won't make it.

Vercelli: And I can say this from past experience with the Italian Swiss. A number of years back, maybe 20 years ago, they were coming out with a line of Hermitage Wines. They were going to be varietals, they were going to be medium priced wines, each wine had a different colored stripe across the bottle, the face of the bottle. They spent a quarter of a million dollars in glass, labels, studies and whatnot, and they never came out with a product. They junked it. They went into two markets. I don't recall the test areas.

Now, I remember the test markets on canned wine. They went into San Diego and they went into Bakersfield. What advertising agency selected those two markets, I don't know, but I would think they were crazy to go into San Diego, which is on the coast and to Bakersfield which is a rural district, a low cost housing...

Mosher: Blue collar all the way.

Vercelli: Blue collar all the way, farming, low, not thousand dollar a ton North Coast farming, but cotton, all the other products, competitive low priced products, and they selected to go in there with canned wine. Of course, it was a total failure. We got more cans out, we produced 15,000 cases of Swiss Miss and I think we got 18-19,000 back, we got everything to come in. In order for the product to come back, each salesman had to fill out a form and had to get approval from the sales manager. Well, they never abided by that...We'd get all types of the products back, such as canned beer, soft drinks, dented cans. We got more product back then we produced. So it is difficult to answer that question.

Mosher: Time will tell.

Vercelli: But they have been successful at everything else.

Mosher: With the exception of Gallo Champagne.

Vercelli: It's hard to predict the marketplace. We (Italian Swiss) had that experience when the salesmen went out. We had the Lejon line of wines, we had the Asti brand, we had the Italian



Swiss Gold Medal brand wines, and a private stock line. They never made a big success of any of them. The only fella that has done that with some success producing two products is Frank Woods of Clos du Bois. He had the premium line that goes to a distributor, he had River Oaks and Clos du Bois. They both say Healdsburg, but he goes into the same distributor and he gives them a product that they can football. They can wheel and deal on the River Oaks product. And then he sells them 10 cases of Clos du Bois at maybe one and a half times the price, he makes a beautiful profit on it and likewise with the wholesaler. The wholesaler can go in, he can have a market go to the restaurant, go to the liquor store in the same market, one distributor.

Mosher: You know who owns that now...Hiram Walker.

Vercelli: Hiram Walker was in the wine industry before.

Mosher: They're in it big now. They've bought Callaway and they bought William Hill, \$36,000,000 for William Hill.

Vercelli: This is correct. They were in and out. Let's see how they do now. They didn't do very much with Callaway. They came in late and they paid through the nose for Clos du Bois, they really paid through the nose. So let's see how they fare.

Let's go back to Hiram Walker. I didn't mention this up until now. Let's talk about the distillers that came into the field as a result of the Second World War. You had Schenley that came in and bought Roma Wine Company. They had it for 25-30 years. You had Seagrams that had Paul Masson. They sold it in recent times. They came back into the industry with Sterling. But Seagrams, little known to anyone, had Mount Tivey Winery and they owned the brandy business, the bulk brandy business was owned by Seagrams. You had Hiram Walker that came in. They bought the winery down at San Benito County and they bought Prati-Martini and bought I. DeTurk up here. They put all their eggs in one basket, in one man—Curt Welchezki. He met an accident and the day after he was dead—let's say—or buried, the situation went like that (snap). They pulled out right away, they sold back their plant to the Martini's.

So the distiller has never been successful in their philosophy in the wine business. So let's see if Hiram Walker makes it this time. Let's hope they make it. It's nice to have their strength, and it's nice to have Nestles' strength for the stability of the Sonoma County industry. All the rest combined, don't amount to a hill of beans. You get some that





handle 40,000 tons of grape it's fine, but how many boutiques do you have to have? You have to have 45 boutiques to equate to the one. So if you get 90 boutiques, they equate to one Hiram Walker. But with Nestles' stability and their willingness to wait a couple of years for a profit, what with Hiram Walker's experience in the liquor field, where they're tremendously highly capitalized and they have to hold their product for so long. Let's hope they remain in the industry.

So that takes us to the present, now let's go back to what you were talking about, marketing or hospitality. It's a pretty narrow field.

Mosher: Let me preface what you're going to say with one little observation and then you can bounce off of it. I noticed with the premium wines from Europe, most especially the wines from France, the Burgundies and Clarets, their prices are determined as the quality of the vintage. Every year up and down, they play with the price every year, they get together in Bordeaux and they decide what they can get.

Vercelli: If we get all this out, put all of our financial strengths and do a good job in marketing, as an industry we still do a very, very poor job in marketing. And that was demonstrated by the abolishment of the Wine Commission. We've had several ventures in marketing. We had the Wine Advisory Board, and we were doing relatively well. Then because of an attitude of one individual, the Governor of the State of California at the time, Jerry Brown, he destroyed it. The work we had spent—I don't know how many millions of dollars we had spent in trying to develop programs that proved relatively effective and they were equal. But for some reason or other the Wine Advisory Board was killed, which I've never been able to understand, as other advisory boards are still in existence.

So as marketers in this industry we do a very, very poor job. That's exemplified in the trade, in the restaurant trade. We still don't sell wine in a restaurant as a food product. We sell it as an embellishment to a meal by charging a tremendously high price. Until we do away with that, until wine becomes as we say it is a *food*—the Italians in North Beach (San Francisco) had an idea. Remember in the period from about 1933 to about maybe 1950, when you went to a small Italian restaurant, the first thing they brought out was a bottle of wine that they decanted either from a gallon or a barrel, they put it on the table and then you ordered. And that was part of the meal. And it didn't cost them very much. When a restaurateur pays 5 cents an ounce for a glass of wine and



serves 4 ounces of it as a glass in a six ounce glass, so that basically is about 30 cents. And they charge us \$4.00 for it.

Mosher: That's going to discourage people.

Vercelli: Well, who can afford it! What we need is the day we get Kentucky Fried Chicken, we get the Pizza people to sell a glass of wine at a reasonable price so that they double their profit. If they pay 4 cents an ounce, at 120 ounces to the gallon at 1 penny, \$1.28 a gallon, then you would get, divide it by 6, you'd get 20, roughly, 20 six ounce glasses, so it costs roughly 6¢ a glass. And to charge a \$1.25 or \$1.50 or \$2.00 a glass! Until we get rid of that we won't make progress, it's the common man, the guy that's going to drink wine every day that counts. It's not the guy that has Sunday wine, it's the fella that consumes the wine daily.

I think that we're out of balance with gallon jugs or the price of jug wine decreasing so that the grower can't make a profit, they're paying \$225 a ton for French Colombard, Chenin Blanc down in the Valley, compared to our Chardonnays at \$1,200 a ton, these inequities for great consumption, have got to be taken care of. And as an industry, we're not marketing or not making that effort to equalize these things.

Mosher: Well, you see, it seems that the early stage of the industry involved people of the earth, people of the ground, people who worked the soil, made the wine with their own hands. It seems like the industry has evolved now to the point where corporate giants from other industries have come in and they never get their hands dirty. They just figure out grand, noble strategies for making, you know, poetry instead of wine. I mean, their egos are on the line. They're aggrandizing their own positions and they love the glamour of all of the wine industry. It seems like this evolution has changed the nature of the pricing structures here, and I don't think it's going to come back down unless there's a real fall out, which could happen. But I don't know...

Vercelli: Our fall out will take place when we continue the decline of consumption. With the new law where the tolerance is reduce to .8 alcoholic content in the blood stream. My daughter went out last night, went out to dinner and so she took her bedding with her. She said, "If I'm going to drink, I'm going to stay at my friend's house." How many people are going to do that? The people who are going to be affected by that law, those are going to pick up, not going to decrease in number, they're going to increase as more people will go in, it'll be the same habitual people. It'll be the same individual who will drive



without a license. So we are annihilating ourselves with legislation. But I think that is a major marketing problem. When the federal government agency, The Center for Science in the Public Interest, tells you that alcohol is bad, when they force you to list on the label the sulfite content, and of the Fetal Alcohol program.

Mosher: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Vercelli: Yes, but look at European countries treatment of wine.

Mosher: Centuries of Italian and French people can't be all that wrong.

Vercelli: And all the others, the Portuguese, the Spaniards. So consequently, when we glorify sulfite that it is harmful for you, but why don't you see it on a piece of fruit where you run 700 parts... Dried apricots, or dried apples, or dried peaches.

Mosher: They're neo-prohibitionists.

Vercelli: Well, here again, it goes back to—we don't know how to market. Some of us talking about **our** Chalk Hill Winery, **our** Russian River Winery. If we put all of our efforts and our funds together to the sulfite situation and not be kicked around in the legislature, not to have these legislatures trying to take, what is it 11 million dollars they paid for the presidential contribution. They paid 11 million dollars. Instead of paying money to these legislatures who turn out to be crooks that we have to put in jail, or they're the city mayor of the most prestigious city in America and he's a hop head, these things we don't fight as an industry. We're not fighting those and that's why we'll always have the problems that we currently have, until we rectify these things. I hope you gentlemen concur with me.

Mosher: Oh, I do. I certainly do. I think we've made the bed, now we're sleeping in it.

Vercelli: We should fight for prices. They talk about the wine being a food. Then treat it as a food! Why do you want to make 500% profit?

Mosher: People only relate to it as alcohol. They don't relate to it as food, as you put it. So, they're relating to one aspect of it.

Vercelli: And what would happen if this Connelly deal goes through? 1200% increase. Little do you realize when the tax goes up, that the wholesaler adds 30-35%, you know what the mark





up is, of course. And then the retailer adds another 50%, of course. Then when it gets to the restaurateur, he adds 200%, of course. So that is why wine is relatively expensive.

So consequently, that's going to be our problem until we get these things cleared away and off the board. No matter how much money someone has that they invest in the industry, he can take a loss for only so much time. But he's not going to take it for an eternity. A recent addition to the Sonoma County wine industry is the Wendt Family. Wendt is a top executive of the SmithKleine pharmaceutical house, he's the owner of Quivera Winery in Dry Creek.

Mosher: Oh, is he, I didn't know that.

Vercelli: Yes, he's the Wendt family. You take all the doctors...

Mosher: ...and you got Lambert Bridge over here too, that's Gerald Lambert, a son of the pharmaceutical firm founder.

Vercelli: Pharmaceutical, yes, Listerine people. You go right down the line and they can lose money for so long, but they can't lose money for an eternity.

Tape 4 Sunday, September 9th

Mosher: It seems to me that prior to Prohibition, Americans were on their way to enjoying wine as a part of the meal and as a more routine part of gracious living, and just living in general, let's say. Lots of the Mediterranean peoples—Italians in particular—settled in this area, wine was a part of their everyday life, it went on the table with the salt and pepper shakers and the silverware, and it was just a common accepted practice. Americans were beginning to adopt wine as a part of their lifestyle.

Prohibition came into effect and for the 13 years of Prohibition, people began to pull away from wine and they were thinking of anything with alcohol, for the alcohol and not for the other benefits that are derived from the enjoyment of wine. We had Americans pulling away from wine as a table beverage that goes with food and relating to alcoholic beverages exclusively, and solely, really for the alcohol content. When Prohibition was repealed, many Americans would have been trained for those 13 years toward drinking things with alcohol for the effect of the alcohol, and that they were trained during that period of time to drink things that were sweet. Meanwhile, the wine industry was left in 1932 with inventories of things that were dry. The American



palate had sweetened up, and consequently, the wine industry was moving in a direction that the American public had moved away from. The industry needed retraining, so that the industry on the North Coast then had to adjust and put out on the market things that were sweeter. And of course, the fact that what wine they had was driving prices down, meant that there was interest in the Prorate program on the part of Dewey Baldocchi, Frank Nervo, and others. They didn't want to participate in the Prorate program, they wanted to maintain the higher North Coast prices because they knew that the wine quality that resulted from the fruit up here was a lot better. We had arrived at the point that Americans appreciated things that were sweet, the industry with inventories of things that were dry that weren't selling, it depressed the prices and we had a real problem from the Repeal of Prohibition up until probably the 50's or 60's, if I remember things that you said in earlier tapes. Is that a fairly reasonable characterization of the wine industry.

Vercelli: Very well done. You summed it up very, very well. And the result was that the people had faith that the conditions would change and consequently, a good number of wineries made wine in 1920 and held on to it for a period of 13 years, during which the wine soured and was of extremely poor quality, consequently they were faced not only with a poor product, but there was no demand for the product they had in inventory, which was partially due to the quality of the wine.

The equipment—(none of the equipment was made of stainless steel) was made of brass, copper and iron. So that during this period of 13 years, all of that equipment which was retained by the wine producers just kind of rusted away or wasn't fit to make wine because of the contaminants such as copper or iron getting into the wine from the existing equipment. We then ran into stability problems, physical problems with the stability of the wine as well as the organic non-acceptance of the product that was available.

Mosher: So at this point could we say that the players, the producers that were to survive, then started sweetening their wines to compensate for the lack of palatability and also to meet the demands of the consuming public so that the dry wine was really being left behind and sweet wines and fortified wines were really the order of the day for that period of time and beyond?

Vercelli: That's very true. That's when we started to realize that we were to make wines such as White Port Tokay, Muscat Angelica, Maderia, and of course, the sherries. We started to



break down the classification of sherries. Right after Repeal you had sherry produced. But as time went on, you started to have a dry sherry, a cocktail sherry, a plain sherry, a cream sherry. Sherry started to bear names such as Olorso after the sherries produced in the sherry producing region of Spain. Demand was for high alcohol and sweetness, so we were primarily a dessert wine consuming industry, a dessert wine producing industry.

Mosher: So we were able to deplete the inventories by making wine in that way?

Vercelli: No, because we were never able to meet the consumer's demands. Our position has always been to produce what we were *able* to produce.

—Let me digress for just a moment. We have talked up to until 1939. As a result of the outbreak of the War in Europe in 1939, conditions in our industry started to change. When the United States entered the War in 1941, there was an immediate policy put upon the wine industry that they could not use table grapes—which had been extensively used in the industry up until possibly the last ten years. Where we were using the table varieties such as Tokay, Empero, Malaga, and of course, the Thompson Seedless, they were the basis for all the dessert wine production, and so, when the government put restrictions on the use of table grapes for wine purposes, there started to be a change in the industry.

We could not buy any equipment made of brass or copper, due to the shortage of these metals for the war effort. We had allocations on many products. So consequently, we had to alter our way of production. Glass, for example, we could not have private molds of glass nor could we have different colored bottles. We had solely one container. It was called the *Victory Bottle*. It was a flint colored, bulb neck container and it was used for all wines by all wine bottlers. I can recall Wentz Brothers bottles—it had a cork in a screw finish bottle—Wentz Brothers packaged their wine with the cork and then with a screw top. Of course, that was short lived.

Another difficulty was in transportation, we couldn't get refrigerator cars which were used primarily to move essential food products rather than wine, which was not considered a food product at that time.

The War was over in '46 and our boys returned home. They had had tremendous exposure to wine, particularly from the European Theater. This experience had a marked effect on





their palates. Dessert wine consumption started to decrease and table wine consumption started to increase—this was directly due to the experiences of the Second World War. Dessert wines continued to exceed sales of table wines until 1967, I believe that that was when table wines started to exceed the sales of dessert wine, and to this day dessert wines have steadily declined whereas table wines have increased up until the last year or so.

I'd like to talk about the period during the War time, the period from 1940 to 1945. Then because of the restriction on the use of the distilling equipment in the distilling industry, the distillers started to invest in California wineries, in order to survive during that period of time, [they] went into the wine industry. National Distillers bought out the Italian Swiss, and Seagrams purchased a winery down in the Valley, Mt. Tivy. Roma Wine Company was purchased by Schenley. Hiram Walker purchased wineries in the North Coast. They bought the Prati-Martini Winery just out of Santa Rosa. They then bought the DeTurk Winery in the City of Santa Rosa and combined the two. They then moved down into the Hollister region. So consequently, that was the result of the Second World War restrictions on the production of distilled spirits. Some didn't last very long. Hiram Walker was the earliest to leave the industry. They had an individual by the name of Curt Welchezki, who was the Vice President in Charge of Production. He met an untimely death during the period Hiram Walker was interested or had holdings in the California Wine Industry. Upon his passing, they immediately withdrew from the industry, but of course, they have reentered in recent times. The National Distillers lasted from 1946-1952, a period of about six years. Schenley lasted a period of about 30 years while Seagrams never left the industry. They got entrenched in the brandy industry with Mt. Tivy, and to this day, unbeknownst to a good many people, Seagrams has been a factor in the California Brandy field since the Second World War.

The period of time from 1940-1944 was a time in which many changes came about. Unfortunate as it may have been, some good came out of the Second World War. The war increased the demand for stainless steel. The price of it was no longer exorbitant, it became competitive with other products, wood and concrete. So consequently, we profited somewhat from the government requiring so much stainless steel for the war effort, that the price became within the realm of use in the wine industry. Stainless steel was now used for very large wine storage containers.



- Mosher: Do you remember who the first people were to use stainless steel?
- Vercelli: No, I couldn't say. But I would think it was more or less simultaneous—with Italian Swiss and Gallo. Gallo was very conservative as to what it did, it always was kind of reserved and cautious—and of course it didn't have the position of leadership that it possesses today. You had the Italian Swiss, you had Fruit Industries, you had Roma Wine Company, you had K. Arkalien, and they were all much larger than Gallo in this period of time from '30's up to the mid-50's, Gallo was never a competitor and never a factor in the industry. They gained their prominence after the Second World War. Incidentally, they had a large inventory of brandy when the War broke out in 1939, this had been produced under the auspices of the Prorate Program and part of the program was that the producer had the right of refusal on purchasing the brandy. So with the brandy market improving in 1939 and 1940, Gallo bought that brandy after receiving compensation, first for distilling, secondly for storing and now they had the opportunity for right of refusal, the first one to buy it. This gave them an advantage, in that they had a brandy where other people didn't. They had a salable product that other people didn't have, which resulted from the Prorate Act.
- Talking about the Gallo's, they also made, and I forgot to tell you about the War effort, they also imported molasses from the Hawaiian and Philippine Islands, primarily the Hawaiian Islands, as did one or two of the other wineries down in the [San Joaquin] Valley that had the productive capacity to handle molasses. Consequently, they operated by producing alcohol for the War effort from molasses.
- During this same period of time, 1941, I developed a process of recovering tartrates from grape pomace. I was financed by the American Cream of Tartar and I had received a priority from the War Production Board where I could buy brass products, such as brass pumps and fittings and the like, so I was able to, for a period of three years, operate. During that period, I took advantage of the situation in that I was able to acquire, because of having a priority granted by the War Production Board, in acquiring redwood tanks, so I acquired 300,000 gallons of redwood tanks and started my venture in Vercelli Brothers Wine Company and Alpine Vineyards, primarily in about 1946 when the War was coming to an end.
- Mosher: You commented that you couldn't distill anything during the War. There was no whiskey, none of that sort of thing. Joe, do you want to tell us more about it?



- Vercelli: Yes, you couldn't distill for consumption. They were distilling for the War effort. They were distilling alcohol, not beverage alcohol, but alcohol that was used in the War Effort. So then they could not bottle any product because normally if they had inventory on hand, they just couldn't bottle it. First of all because of the labor shortage, they weren't permitted to package. There was a tremendous labor shortage during the War. And of course women were used in all pursuits.
- Mosher: Rosie, the Riveter.
- Vercelli: Yes, Rosie, the Riveter. Women had taken the place of the men in the work place because there was a manpower shortage. I don't recall that any distiller was permitted to bottle. I don't know of any bottlers, really, there was a scarcity of whiskeys and brandies during this period of time.
- Mosher: The people that were left behind that weren't either in the Pacific area or Western Europe and they wanted to drink whiskey, what did they do? They didn't drink any, huh?
- Vercelli: Well, they didn't drink any or they had a supply stored away from the pre-war period.
- Mosher: Could Seagrams or some other Canadian producer supply us?
- Vercelli: Well, they had their product on the market, although I don't recall them bottling anything because of the War effort. They just had inventory stored up. But I don't recall anyone bottling.
- Mosher: Was it considered to be—
- Vercelli: Unpatriotic.
- Mosher: Unpatriotic to be drinking something like that when it was illegal during the War.
- Vercelli: We had food rationing. We were all on sugar stamps. We had stamps to buy sugar, stamps to buy flour.....
- Mosher: So distilled spirits were considered to be a luxury that we would just jolly well have to live without during the war.
- Vercelli: But the minute that the War was over and they could use these grapes from the Southern part of the state the demand for our product dropped, then we were in the same dilemma. We just didn't find a market.





Mosher: This is a change of emphasis or topic here a little bit—but since there's such pressure for houses and other types of commercial and industrial development in Sonoma County these days, and the same is true in Napa and other areas as well, Solano obviously, and places like that, do you recall when agricultural zoning came into being. In other words, when were the first rumblings that we had a valuable commodity, a resource here known as agriculture and it needed to be preserved.

Vercelli: I can't give you the date.

Mosher: Was it in the 50's?

Vercelli: —We could find out. That was the Williamson Act, which was enacted by the State Legislature. With this Act if you put your land into an agricultural preserve, your taxes would not be increased. As a result of that that's when they first started to segregate or give land some value so that it wouldn't be taken away by developers. It did give land value and it also gave land a means of remaining in the hands of people that were interested in agriculture. And I would say that the Williamson Act could have been about 20 years ago, that bring us around 1970...

Mosher: Yes, that sounds about right.

Vercelli: ... latter part of the 1960's, early 70's. After the passage of the Act, it took quite a few years before the farmers realized what they had. It took maybe four or five years to really see the Act put in, to see the Williamson Act put into effect by the, particularly, grape growers. Of course, they couldn't sell their property during that period—that it was under the Act and many people, because of the appreciation of the land per se, many people were sorry that they went in the Act because they couldn't get out of it for a given period of time. They had made a certain commitment for a given period of time.

Mosher: This is a ten year contract that renews itself if you don't stop it. But once you stop it, it takes ten years until it gets out of contract. I think that's the way it works.

Vercelli: Yes.

Mosher: Well, it's interesting today that I'm told by people who have been in this industry a long time that there actually were more acres planted to grapes before Prohibition than there even are today in 1990.



Vercelli: Oh, yes.

Mosher: And there were more wineries, too. Now, I know there must have been small Mom & Pop wineries, but still, they were commercial ventures and I think that the industry was so strong so many years ago and it's taken so long to come back.

Vercelli: Yes, that's very true.

Mosher: We're talking now about the Santa Rosa area and some of the early wineries that were in the area and contrasting that with today where there are zero. But back after Prohibition and after World War II there were quite a number of little wineries in the Santa Rosa area and Joe's going to tell us about those.

Vercelli: Yes. In the Santa Rosa area you had the I. DeTurk Winery, which was established by I. DeTurk, one of the members of the viticultural commissions there were formed around 1880. Then you had other wineries. You had Botasso, Bennett Valley, you had the Meda Brothers that produced champagne, using the champenois method, and then you had Particella in Forestville, you had Lagomasino on Piner Road, and a couple of miles from Lagomasino you had Alpine Winery, which was the Alpine Winery that I subsequently acquired under the Alpine Vineyard label. It had been established in Alpine Valley east of Santa Rosa in 1893. The land was owned by the Meekers and was densely forested. The Meekers wanted to clear the land, so they hired an emigrant from Switzerland by the name of John Greeott. He cleared the land and for his compensation he received part of the land. The land was a relatively large holding and Greeott wound up with a large portion of it and established his Alpine Winery in 1893. From Alpine Valley, he moved into 15th Street in Santa Rosa prior to Prohibition and he sent his wines all over the United States. He was an extremely well-respected vintner, and he had perhaps 100-150,000 gallons capacity there on 15th Street. Then he moved to Piner, acquired a ranch and converted a barn into a winery in 1934. I acquired his holdings in 1938-39.

Mosher: Also, you commented about the Grace Brothers.

Vercelli: Oh, yes. The Grace Brothers, that's very important. Sometime during the Prohibition period, Joe Grace acquired the Golden State Champagne label which was the property of the Italian Swiss prior to Prohibition. Sometime during the Prohibition era, Joe Grace acquired that label. He also



acquired the DeTurk Wine Cellars, he owned the DeTurk Winery which was subsequently sold to Hiram Walker. The Rossis, the Italian Swiss tried to get that Golden State label back, but they were unsuccessful. In the meantime, someone in Southern California used the word Golden State for the production of sparkling wine, but they didn't make a go of it and they went by the board. But it's interesting to know the history of this famous label, Golden State Champagne.

Mosher: When did the Grace Brothers go into the brewery business in Santa Rosa?

Vercelli: Oh, I can't answer that, they've been there a long time. I've known Joe Grace since he had a hop field out in Alexander Valley right across the street from the entrance to the Jordan Winery. He owned all that land. In fact, the home one sees just to the west of the entrance to Jordan Winery [Alexander Valley Road] was the home in which Joe Grace lived. And I recall seeing hops growing there when I was a youngster coming through to visit in Healdsburg and then I recall him uprooting the hops and putting in grapes. I remember they were Alicante Bouschet and they never ripened. The Italian Swiss had an opportunity of acquiring the grape while I was in their employ, but the Alicante Bouschet never had much maturity. It did have a tremendous crop. It was certainly quantity, but not quality.

Mosher: It had a colorful juice, though.

Vercelli: Oh, yes. This is why you don't see an Alicante Bouschet Blush.

Mosher: No, that would be impossible unless you stripped it with a charcoal filter or something! Well, that's interesting. So what was Alicante used with? Was it blended with Zinfandel and things like that?

Vercelli: No, it was used for common, ordinary dry red wine. But during Prohibition Era, it was extensively grown. In fact, it replaced the varietal grapes that we were producing, such as, Zin, Cabernets, what little Pinot and whatever grape varieties because it has an open bunch, a straggly bunch and it could stand shipping. It wouldn't mold, wouldn't rot. And then the other reason was that the home winemaker would make his free run wine.

Mosher: I'm kind of wondering about these various valleys. We had hops being grown in Hopland. In Alexander Valley, we had a





lot of prunes. So we had much more of a mixed agricultural picture back them, didn't we?

Vercelli:

Oh, yes. When I moved to Healdsburg from Asti in 1936, in '37 acquired a piece of property and there were grapes and pears on the property. We had about three acres of pears. We couldn't find a buyer for fresh pears, so we dehydrated them. We dried them, we built a sulphur house, my mother, my wife and friends cut the fruit and dried it, and then we couldn't find a market for dried fruit. The price of dried pears, now listen carefully, the price of dried pears sold for 1 and a quarter cents per pound. We were able to sell the pears through friendship. There was a fellow by the name of Alexander Croce with whom I went to grammar school and high school. He was my brother's age, 4 years older than I. He went to the University of California and when he got out, he went to work for the California Packing Corporation in San Francisco. That was, he got out in about 1932, somewhere thereabouts, out of Cal, so he had been working for five or six years by this time. He got a hold of the buyer by the name of Earl Frampton and it was through him that we were able to sell all our pears at a cent and a quarter a pound. The minute the pears were delivered, we converted the pear trees into firewood.

Then there were pears, there were tremendous amounts of prunes, there were apples, there still are a few apples, still a few prunes grown, but there were a lot of hops and during the Second World War from a period of let's say 1940-1945 we had the truck gardening. There were beans grown in Santa Rosa. Any place where you had rich land, like you had land that could flood, they'd put in beans because it was really rich soil along the river. Any distance of land that was clear, where you didn't have too many rocks, they'd put in beans. Of course, they'd harvest the beans before the flood would come and wash the beans away. You had a lot of beans grown in and around Santa Rosa and around the river area. Also tomatoes, you had a lot of tomatoes grown during the War years in the area here. You had, I don't recall when the canneries were built, maybe the First World War, you had the canneries in Healdsburg, but in the Second World War, we had no canneries in Healdsburg, everything was shipped out.

Mosher:

You commented about your pear production, you commented on a sulphur tent. Since sulphur is kind of an issue in the wine business today, just as an aside or maybe a digression, or as a tangent anyway, isn't it true that wine from this area in California uses a little more than 25-40 parts per million of



sulfur, whereas some of those dried fruit products like pears and apples and prunes and various things might have up to 700 parts per million of the sulphates?

Vercelli:

If you look at me carefully, you'll see the hair standing up on my arms. It makes me angry to think that all the fruit producers—pears, peaches, apricots—I had a lot of experience with apricots in my youth. My aunt had a ranch in Cupertino with prunes and apricots, they acquired it right after the First World War in 1922, and for the first few years they grew tomatoes and truck gardening, while the apricots and prune trees were growing. There were ten acres. I spent many a vacation down there to learn about apricots. And to think that I worked at the sulphur houses and around sulphur and never found anyone that was really allergic to sulphur and here today there's no labels on fruit with 700 parts per million. But today when we have solely 25 parts, as high as, free sulphur or higher of free sulphur we could run maybe 75-100 parts total sulphur, there's two different types of sulphur, two different reactions. The free sulphur is the effective sulphur. That's the sulphur that prevents oxidation and all of this from growing. And with 25 parts of free, you can rest assured you had great stability. So I really think that our American public is gullible to be able to be talked into treating their—Well that's part of the Prohibition element that is in our nation today, that *has been here*, the Puritanical effect of our ancestors.

Mosher:

Yes, well, they've been pretty successful, I guess, haven't they? Because they'd really like to bring back Prohibition. They'd like to put a skull and crossbones on the label if they could get away with it.

End of Tape



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